

Fightback

Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism



Issue 47

Syrian Voices

Interviews on the Syrian Revolution

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Editorial



It has been over 10 years since the Syrian Revolution first broke out in early 2011, as a part of a broader regional uprising widely dubbed the “Arab Spring.”

After beginning as an inspiring democratic moment, the Syrian Revolution has become increasingly fragmented: bloody Assadist counter-revolution forcing armed conflict, opportunistic intervention by international actors, and sectarianism have all displaced the memory of the democratic revolution for many. Yet *Fightback* maintains that remembering the democratic, non-sectarian, popular nature of the initial movement is essential. There are still many lessons to learn from this experience, both positive and negative.

A revolution in practice demands a revolution in thought. However, sections of the left have learnt nothing from a regional uprising which challenged dictatorial regimes regardless of their geopolitical alignment. Instead, these ‘anti-imperialists’ have maintained a US-centric perspective that focuses solely on geopolitics, and erases ground-level experiences in Syria and elsewhere. *Fightback* rejects this perspective, in favour of a renewed left internationalism relevant to contemporary movements.

We must centre Syrian Revolutionary voices when discussing the Syrian Revolution, in keeping with the general principle of ‘nothing about us without us’ which applies to many struggles. In this issue we have compiled a series of interviews with Syrians reflecting on the revolution, conducted over 2018-2022, including one *Fightback* interview and three transcripts of interviews from the *Where’s My Jetpack* podcast. The interviewees are all diasporic, reflecting both the structural barriers which silence those remaining in Syria and surrounding refugee camps, and the diasporic nature of the Syrian community generally.

We hope these interviews help to keep the flame of the revolution alive, readying us all for the fire next time.





Miream Salameh (2018): "All the world will be affected, not just Syria"



Miream Salameh is a Syrian-Australian artist. This was originally published in Fightback's Syrian Revolution issue (2018).

Ani White: First of all, can you tell us why you were forced to seek refuge and how this happened?

Miream Salameh: At the beginning of the revolution, I worked with a group of my friends to create a magazine against the tyrannical regime that ruled Syria for fifty years. This regime is represented by the Assad family, which seized power in a military coup by Hafez al-Assad.

Our aim in founding this magazine was to present our ideas, the goals and principles of our revolution and our dream of building a new free, civil and democratic Syria. All of us should be equal under the law that achieves equality and justice for all. The aim was also to document the crimes of the Assad regime and its violations of international law – which is still under the eyes of the entire international community – against all those who have participated in this revolution and supported it even with a word.

But after six months we were forced to stop it after we were attacked by the Assadist forces. I remember very well how in the second raid we miraculously survived the inevitable deaths by field execution that Assad carried out at every raid. I lost two of my friends in that brutal way; during a raid on Deir Baalba in Homs in the first year of the revolution, the Assad gangs shot my friend Hatem Mohammad, who was an artist too, directly in his head and heart. His relatives could not take the body until fifteen days after Assad's forces left the area – or face being arrested or dying under torture in his prisons. On this day we were three friends in the house watching a video that I filmed in a region loyal to Assad in Homs to document the crimes of Assad and his regime. In this video I documented the stolen property that Assad's regime and its intelligence and army were selling at the lowest prices in a market they call the Sunni market; they rob those areas whose people were shelled and forced to flee, then the Assad regime enters and

steals, and sometimes do not just do that, they also burn some houses. One person shown in the video told how when they left these areas with cars full of stolen stuff, the army at the checkpoints took the LCD screens and laptops and left them the rest of the stuff to sell in the Sunni market.

Going back to the raid day, as we watched the video and handed over the caricatures, Assad's forces began to besiege the neighbourhood and prepared to raid it. I quickly went out with my friends who took me out of the neighbourhood and then returned to document what would happen. Assad's forces committed an outrageous massacre, killing 20 people and arresting many, including women, who were stripped naked in public, and arrested them. Assad's forces destroyed all our things and stole all that was valuable. During that time I received many threats and warnings, and was forced to leave for Lebanon without informing anyone. But death threats, arrests and rape will continue if I try to go back to my country. During my stay in Lebanon, one week after my arrival in Australia, I was attacked along with my friends by Hezbollah and they attempted to kidnap me. But we were rescued with the help of two Lebanese gendarmes and three Syrian people who were there by chance and brought us home safely. I don't know if I would be alive now otherwise. Then we came here on a humanitarian visa.

Ani White: How did the Syrian revolution begin? What were the demands of the revolution?

Miream Salameh: The Syrian revolution began after students at a school in Daraa wrote anti-Assad slogans on the walls of their schools. So the Assad regime arrested and tortured them and this angered their parents who went to claim and demand the release of their children, but the security forces told them: forget your children and make others, and if you cannot, send us your women to do so. People in Daraa began to take to the streets and demand the release of their children and all those detained in Assad's prisons. These demonstrations moved to the rest of the Syrian cities, one of these was my city Homs. Our demands were initially to reform the regime, release the detainees and abolish the state of emergency, but the regime did not respond to these demands and tried to suppress the demonstrations in a brutal way, from firing live bullets at the demonstrators to firing missiles, and using internationally prohibited weapons such as cuneiform bombs. They carried out campaigns of detention against all those suspected of joining the revolution or supporting it even with a word, but the more violence the regime inflicted, the more the demonstrations grew to overthrow this bloody regime and build a free democratic civil state in which we all live equally under a law that protects the freedom and dignity of the individual – not a

law that is amended to suit the regime's interests, the way they did when Hafez al-Assad died, and they amended the constitution within three minutes to let Bashar take power after his dead father.

Ani White: Who is primarily responsible for the atrocities (and the political crisis) in Syria?

Miream Salameh: All the responsibility for war crimes is with the regime of Assad, no one else, all the destruction and half a million refugees at home and abroad, and large numbers of detainees and abductees. The Assad regime committed all of this and was responsible for it with the help of his Russian and Iranian allies, as well as ISIS, al-Qaeda and the Nusra Front. I include ISIS and al-Qaeda in this because Assad assisted them in entering Syria and put them in the areas to be a pretext for him to bombard and control and create displacement of their people. No-one benefits from their presence as much as Assad. In addition to al-Qaeda, Assad is the one who released the extremists and criminals from his prisons at the beginning of the revolution, for the same reasons that I mentioned earlier and to make it seem like our revolution is Islamist in form. Thus he has a strong argument before world public opinion to eliminate the revolution. Assad is the one who released Zahran Alloush [leader of the Jaysh al-Islam armed faction] who used people as shields and put them on the roofs of houses to prevent Assad from shelling them. He is no different from the Assad regime and is similar in criminality. All these Assad did to justify the war crimes he committed against unarmed civilians, bombarding them in their schools and homes, hospitals and markets using internationally banned weapons including phosphorus, chemical and others.

We all saw the massacre committed against our people in as-Suwayda city at the hands of ISIS. But we all know who brought them on buses from Yarmouk camp to the east of as-Suwayda to control the area there. This claim comes from the people of as-Suwayda who knew Assad's games and put all the responsibility for what happened there on the Assad regime. And some of them said that the kidnappers all were Da'esh [ISIS], in fact they were detainees in the prisons of the regime.

The Assad regime is the one who made our land an area of international conflicts between America, Russia and others. There is so much evidence that the only man responsible for what happened to my country is Assad.

Ani White: How do you respond to claims that Assad protects Christians and minorities?

Miream Salameh: Assad did not protect the minorities but protected himself by using them. The Assad regime did not show mercy to any

of its opponents, neither the Christian nor the Druze, nor even the Alawites, who are the sect he belongs to. He arrested and killed a lot under torture and displaced them. Also he killed people whom were from his own sect and loyalists at the beginning of the revolution to claim that it was the rebels who killed them, and to lie to them that our revolution was an Islamic revolution aimed at killing all the minorities, I remember once sitting in al-Arman area, one of them told me: We shelled three buildings here in al-Arman. I asked him why he did that. He said because we want to make the people here believe that the revolutionaries did it and that their revolution is an Islamic revolution. I told him, but what about the children, women and residents of these buildings who were hit by these missiles? He said: It does not matter, the important thing is to believe what we want and fight alongside the regime. The regime has done a lot of these dirty tricks.

I am from the Christian minority in Syria and from a village called Marmarita, a Christian village in Wadi al-Nasara. I was forced to flee my country after I received many threats just because I stood against this criminal regime and participated in the revolution. Many young people in my village were arrested for the same reason, and after their release they immediately left the country. The artist and my teacher Wael Qustoun, who is from my village and was based in Homs, was arrested by the Assad intelligence and tortured to death because of his refusal to paint a helmet for the army. None of his family members knew of his fate until someone saw his body in the hospital with 200 other bodies. That person called the Wael family to take his body before they took him with the rest, to bury them in mass graves without informing anyone about their fate or what happened to them inside the prison. They forced his family to say that the unknown armed groups were the ones who kidnapped Wael and killed him. This what happened to me and my family and people really close to me. There are many, many more stories that anyone can learn, like the story of Marcel Chahrour, Basil Shehadeh and many others. They deny the claims that Assad protects minorities.

Ani White: What role have international actors played in Syria, particularly the USA and Russia?

Miream Salameh: I am not a political analyst, but everyone who follows the Syrian situation is fully aware that no one cared about the death and displacement of the Syrian people. The Russians, the Iranians and Hezbollah participate with Assad in his war crimes against defenceless people. This applies to America and even to Australia, when they participated in the bombing under the pretext of eliminating terrorism.

We all know that all of them took part in this for their own interests, so that they don't care about Assad himself and were ready to get rid of him when they were done with him. Even the Turks themselves, who some believe they are friends of the Syrian people, killed many Syrians as they crossed the border to escape the bombing to Turkey.

America has bombed many military sites and bases of Assad: but it is known to the free Syrian people that it is not because it cares about the Syrian people, especially after Trump's decision to prevent Syrians from entering America. This applies to everyone.

After almost seven years, we no longer trust anyone, not even the United Nations and the international community, who could not prevent Assad from committing his own massacres, especially forced displacement and ethnic cleansing against the people, which is an international war crime under UN resolutions. Instead of stopping that, they were working to find safe passages to Syrians leave their homes and neighbourhoods. That is, Assad committed this crime under their auspices, and they came in after that and set up tents for us in neighbouring countries.

Ani White: Can you explain what Assad and Putin's assault on Idlib means for Syrian politics?

Miream Salameh: It's crushing one of the last areas held by the revolutionaries. The same will happen as happened in Aleppo, Darya and Ghouta – massacres of people. Idlib has refugees from those areas that have already been assaulted. So three million people will be attacked. Assad is ethnically cleansing, which is a war crime. It will not relieve things for us, and also Turkey will face a huge wave of refugees. And many refugees will go by boat to reach Europe. All the world will be affected if this happens to Idlib, not just Syria.

And Turkey made a deal with Russia, to pursue a political resolution, not because Turkey cares about the people and want to save lives, I think Turkey just wants to save their country and not have to deal with refugees. And we all know what Russia and Assad want from Idlib, they want all of the territory in regime hands.

Ani White: How do you respond to claims that the revolution is simply sectarian?

Miream Salameh: How can the revolution be sectarian? It includes all people from different religious backgrounds. There are the Druze, the Christian, the Alawi, the Sunni, and all of us have a dream of building a free and democratic Syria that is equal to everyone under the law.

But what we talked about previously, about the release of the extremists by Assad and giving ISIS entry to our country, in addition to the media, which also played a big role in the painting of our revolution as Islamist. Not just this, but also it tried to show that there was no revolution at the start; when the media mention the Syrian situation they only mention civil war and never mentioned the Syrian revolution. But after seven years of the Assad regime, trying to crush our revolution in the most brutal ways, and the hypocrisy of the big powers and the international community and the United Nations closing their eyes to the crimes of Assad against us, the demonstrations in Idlib embarrass them all showing that the revolution is not dead, and did not die, and will not die.

During the revolution, its activists whose work was characterised by civil action were targeted by all the extremist parties represented by ISIS, al-Qaeda and the Assad regime. Naji Al-Jarf was targeted by ISIS who shot at him in Turkey, and Jaysh al-Islam kidnapped Razan Zaytouneh and her comrades, whose fate we do not yet know, and many more who were targeted by ISIS and al-Qaeda. And we don't need to mention what the Assad regime did and still does to all of the activists of the revolution, because it is clear and obvious to all of us. All these criminals share one interest: to eliminate the revolution because they know that the victory of the revolution means the end of all of them.

Ani White: What bearing does understanding the political situation in Syria have on refugee solidarity in Australia?

Miream Salameh: When we started leaving Syria in the first year of the revolution, the government badmouthed refugees. I don't think the government cares about refugees. I remember there was one guy who was in the detention centre in Syria, and the Australian government deported him back to Syria, and the Syrian government arrested him there for 28 days, and they bombed his area and killed his father. If I went back to Syria, they would arrest me.

Ani White: You've said Australia has a discriminatory refugee policy in how it ranks Syrians. Can you explain that?

Miream Salameh: Australia gave priority in granting asylum to Christian asylum seekers, ignoring the many refugees who had been stranded in the refugee camps for almost 7 years without any basic necessities of life, and that leads these people to risk their lives and the lives of their children at sea. Those who survived the drowning were detained in the detention centres of Nauru and Manus Island. In these prisons, there are families – women and children held for four years – and many more.

Can you imagine children being forced to spend their childhood in such places, after they survived inevitable death in their country, for no reason?

In Australia, the boats were stopped under the pretext of preserving people's lives. But if they really cared, they would offer an alternative to getting in unsafe boats, and offer a real solution to their suffering, like granting a humanitarian visa, easing restrictions on humanitarian visas. Humanitarian visas should be based on the conditions that people are in, not based on needing sponsors. Also Australia has bombed my country and made more refugees. If they really cared, they would not participate in the bombing.

Ani White: What do you think about the protests against Trump's bombings?

Miream Salameh: It's funny how people get angry about this bombing, when the US has been bombing my country since 2014, and killing many civilians, yet people only protest when he bombs an Assad military base, killing nobody, and announcing it in advance so that Assad could evacuate. Listen to Syrians before you try to do something for us.

Ani White: Do Syrian refugees (practically speaking) have the right to return?

Miream Salameh: The right of refugees to return will not happen until something changes in our country. They need to stop the ethnic cleansing. Assad remains in power. They need to address these things, before they talk about our return to Syria. It will not be possible to return while the regime stays in power. And in terms of ISIS and al-Qaeda, as long as the regime stays in power these problems will continue. First Assad needs to be taken out of power, then we need to address the sectarianism, then we can rebuild our country.

Ani White: What can people in Australia or Aotearoa do to support Syrians?

Miream Salameh: We have to listen to Syrians, convey the truth of what's going on, stand together as people and pressure the government here, and the rest of the world's governments. My country, especially the media, is politicised. We must exert great pressure on the international community and the United Nations to do their work honestly, in protecting the human rights for which they were founded.

I believe that only people have the power to change for a better world. I believe that this will be the first serious step to stand with the Syrian people in their revolution and end their ordeal.

Joseph Daher (2020):

"The struggling popular classes should remain our lodestar"



Transcript of an episode originally broadcast by *Where's My Jetpack* podcast, on March 15th 2020.

Audio: Syrian revolutionary dabke.¹

Ani White: That was a Syrian revolutionary dabke² from 2011, a time when freedom seemed nearer. The dabke had lyrics calling for the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad who nine years later is still holding power through brutality. I'm personally reminded of rallies outside the Russian embassy in Wellington where young Syrian men took over the mic and performed this dabke along with various chants, including the slogan *ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam* or *the people want the fall of the regime*, a chant that crossed all borders during the Arab Spring.

Kia ora, comrades, and welcome to *Where's My Jetpack?*, a politics and pop culture podcast with sci-fi and socialist leanings. I'm Ani White.

Derek Johnson: And I'm Derek Johnson.

Ani White: This month, on March 15th, the 9th anniversary of the Syrian Revolution we're talking to Joseph Daher, a Swiss-Syrian socialist activist, academic, and founder of the blog Syria Freedom Forever. Joseph is part of the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project at the European University Institute, Florence in Italy. He's the author of *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God* which was released in 2016 by Pluto Press, and *Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience* released in 2019 by Pluto Press and Haymarket.

Welcome to the show Joseph.

Joseph Daher: Thank you for the invitation.

Ani White: Thank you for coming on.

You're involved in the recently formed Alliance of Middle East and North African (MENA) Socialists. Can you describe how this came together and the work the group's done so far?

Joseph Daher: Well, initially we started Frieda Afary and I, and I would like to salute Frieda for her work. She's been the main architect and motor in the alliance, in her daily work to push forward this group of people. Initially, it was only gathering people from Iran and Syria, and after we enlarged it to various different countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The objective with this group is to establish a formal network of socialist progressives who wanted to give a particular international progressive analysis and outlook on the region, through statements, articles, and other means such as you may have seen, debates on Facebook, conferences on Facebook. I've tried to put people in contact. What is really important for us is *exchange* between socialists and progressives of the region and the diaspora in exile, and with other internationalists.

We give also particular attention to, not only issues of exploitation, against the capitalist state, but also against oppression regarding women's rights, minorities' rights, and how we link it to the particular political and economic system we live in. We've organised various conferences live-streamed. The latest one being the feminist dialogue between Iranian, Iraqi, Palestinian, Lebanese, Chilean women.

So we're a small network but trying to do what we can to give a particular internationalist and progressive understanding of the region.

Derek Johnson: Alright, I've listened to one of the live-streams. I was watching that. There was a lot of people on that! That was pretty well coordinated.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCS8SsFOBAI&t=12s>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dabke>

Joseph Daher: Indeed.

Derek Johnson: What are the main things everyone needs to know about the Syrian Revolution?

Joseph Daher: Well I think one of the most important things people should know about the Syrian Revolutionary process, is to remember that it started in the framework of the other general uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, etc, with the same fundamental objective roots. Meaning the absence of democracy, the absence of social justice with blockades of the productive economic forces, and a willingness also for popular sovereignty against their despots but also against all kind of foreign interventions, whether regional or international.

Another very important aspect is the strength and the deepness of the popular movement in Syria, and especially in the two first years of the uprising. Remembering the coordination committees, the local councils, the youth organisations that came out, the various strikes that occurred on different occasions, civil actions, there were definitely attempts of a situation of double-power, meaning that the state had disappeared from large areas and people were self-organising. I think this is really important to remember, especially now when we've only been hearing about Syria through war, conflict, extremism, etc.

Derek Johnson: What are the most dangerous myths circulating about the Syrian Revolution?

Joseph Daher: What's interesting when we look at the different myths circulating about the Syrian Revolution it's always, whether directly or indirectly, a vision from above. A vision from above meaning that people see not what is happening from below, from the dynamics of the popular uprising, people self-organising but, for example, portraying the Syrian Revolution as a conspiracy. *Foreign powers controlling protesters, they're pushing them to go in the streets and controlling the movement.* This has been one of the most dangerous myths in terms of conspiracy.

Also very much linked, most of the time, to the geopolitical view of war, *only seeing* various regional and international powers as struggling against each other. One of the most famous examples of this vision of saying '*it's a geopolitical war only*' is saying that it's an issue of oil, gas, and petrol that started the war - opposition between these various regional and international actors.

Similarly, I think it's very dangerous to portray the Syrian Revolution as a sectarian war from its beginning, and only portraying this uprising as opposing Sunni majority against

an Alawi minority. Or portraying everything that is occurring in Syria according to a kind of Orientalist lens that understands people of the region through their religion or ethnicity.

And finally, it's less dangerous than the others, but it's still a bit limiting of the prospect of understanding Syria, is limiting understanding to a democratic struggle. And this is not particular to Syria but throughout the Middle East, especially among liberals throughout various parts of the world, seeing these popular uprisings as only a way to achieve parliamentary democracy. While I think it was much more than this, much deeper. It was not only democratic issues but it was also socioeconomic issues and a protest against the decades of neoliberal policies being implemented in Syria, and in the region more generally speaking.

Ani White: Could you talk about how the situation became armed, because I know along with the myths that circulate there's also a lot of accusatory accounts of basically why the rebels became armed, so could you maybe talk about how that situation developed?

Joseph Daher: Indeed, we should not forget the militarisation of the Syrian uprising which became total, I would say, two years after its beginning but started in nearly June 2011. It started first as a way to defend protesters against the violent attacks of the security services and sections of the army. So people started to organise on a neighbourhood level; village, city, to defend the protesters and allow them to continue the protests. The composition of the people that took arms - there were a section of the people who took arms that had defected from the army but actually, the vast majority of people were civilians that took arms. As we always say, it was forced upon the Syrians to defend themselves, to take up arms. So the dynamics were very much from below, at the beginning with coordination with civilian activists, the civilian protest movement trying to have both hands. On one side maintaining a strong civilian protest movement, while being able to defend itself against the violent attack of regime forces. But throughout time these dynamics from below progressively unfortunately disappeared and the civilian protest movement lost its power, its strength, especially when the Syrian uprising turned completely into a military battle, I would say after 2013 / 2014, limiting the resistance against the regime *mostly* or dominated, at least, by military struggles. This is without forgetting as well the role played by foreign forces and the Assad regime in strengthening, through their different ways, but leading to the same result; to the strengthening of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces.

The regime, for example, liberated from its prison jihadists and Salafists at the beginning of the uprising - while it was continuously imprisoning, repressing and killing democrats, progressives, putting them in prison, and letting them develop. And the regime continuously for most of the uprising concentrated on democratic forces of the Free Syrian Army while letting develop the Islamic fundamentalist forces. At the same time, foreign countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar supported mostly reactionary armed forces, turning them into proxies or, as well, Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements that were opposed to the initial objectives of the uprisings, just as the regime. This is why they turned their arms very often against civilian activists of the protest movement, against local councils and also attacked other groups of the Free Syrian Army.

Ani White: Can you tell us about the contemporary situation in Syria, particularly what's happening in Idlib?

Joseph Daher: So we can see a new forced displacement of nearly a million people in Idlib since the beginning of the military offensive led by the Syrian armed forces, assisted by Russian bombardments and also various militias controlled by Iran. So as I mentioned, more than 7 million people have been forced to leave their homes with this military offensive. The Syrian regime has reached the symbolic and strategic city of Saraqib. Saraqib was a city that was known for its democratic civilian protest movement that opposed the regime initially and later when Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces entered they also opposed them. It was a very active and vivid city of democratic aspirations and it's also very strategic in terms of locations because it allowed the regime to access several main highways that connected Aleppo to Damascus. So the situation in Idlib is absolutely catastrophic, and this is without forgetting that this region has been suffering for the past few years of bombardments of the regime and Russian airforces targeting civilians, hospitals, medical institutions and other civilian institutions with catastrophic consequences.

I would like to remind people who perhaps didn't know, but Idlib was between having a population of 2.5 to three million people with half of them already being internally displaced, while Turkish borders are still closed and people cannot leave. So there are refugee camps close to the border and people live in horrific conditions. This is the situation in Idlib and it's a catastrophic humanitarian situation in all aspects.

Otherwise, when we speak about the country, the country has suffered vast damage and widespread

destruction because of the Damascus war machine, backed by its allies Russia and Iran. Of course, we shouldn't forget other foreign actors contributed to the displacement of the population and destruction in the country, particularly the military interventions of the US, Turkey and to a lesser extent the armed opposition forces such as the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces.

Today, six million Syrians are IDPs - Internally Displaced in the country. More than nearly the same amount of people are refugees outside of the country, so more than half of the population in Syria is forcefully displaced. Around 90% of the population live under the poverty line, while 11 million people are in need of humanitarian aid inside the country. The cost of reconstruction is estimated at around 400 billion US dollars. So, as you can see the situation in Syria is catastrophic. People are very much suffering, the socioeconomic situation is getting worse with the depreciation of the Syrian pound, high inflation, while you have a small minority around Bashar al-Assad and this elite that made huge fortunes out of the war and their contacts with the regime. Nothing to be happy about currently regarding the situation in Syria, unfortunately, the catastrophe is continuing.

Ani White: It has been inspiring to see the revival of uprisings elsewhere in the region like in Lebanon. Do you think this could in any way affect the prospects in Syria?

Joseph Daher: Indeed it is very inspiring to see the massive and deep protest movement in Lebanon as well as in Iraq and Tunis, the protest movement in Sudan and Algeria, remembering people that started in 2010-2011. It's still continuing. It's a long revolutionary process with ups and downs. At the end of 2018, we thought we were really in a period of deep counter-revolution, which we are still, but these movements gave us hope. Who would have thought that in the beginning of 2019 two dictators that had been in power for more than 30 years would be overthrown, Omar al-Bashir in Sudan and Bouteflika in Algeria? So this is very important, while in Lebanon and Iraq, two neighbouring countries to Syria, is also a key aspect in this issue and especially in your question.

It will have and it already has consequences in Syria. What we can say is that the regime *has survived* and *will survive* for the short and midterm, especially with the assistance of Moscow and Tehran but its resilience does not mean the end of its contradictions or of any feeling of dissent in the country, especially in areas that were formerly held by opposition forces. Despite engaging in repression the regime still faces challenges. These challenges are very big challenges for the regime

and they are the reasons that lead to the uprisings in the first place - absence of democracy even deepened socioeconomic injustice inequalities. But this does not mean that it translates into political opportunities for the opposition and especially the problem is that no viable organised opposition has appeared, especially today. The failure of the opposition in exile and armed opposition groups have left. Many people who had sympathised with the uprising are feeling frustrated and bitter. The absence of a structured independent democratic inclusive social Syrian opposition which would *appeal* to the popular classes and social activists has made it difficult for various sectors of the population to unite and challenge the regime on a national scale. For example, the latest demonstrations in the region of Suwayda are against the economic situation and difficult living conditions in the country, which is an often repeated criticism in many other areas of the country, even in the so-called loyalist areas. Also, the continued protests and armed clashes in the region of Daraa against regime forces demonstrate this situation in many ways, that you have regional protests without coordination between them.

So what I would say to this question, *yes it gives us hope* - the struggle in Lebanon and Iraq, especially challenging sectarianism *and* neoliberalism – but *as well* without the construction of this political alternative that is appealing, that is social, secular, and opposing both the regime and Islamic fundamentalist forces, it will be hard to transform these political opportunities into something on a national scale opposing the regime, I would say.

Derek Johnson: How would you describe the political economy of the Syrian regime prior to the revolution and the role that this played in fostering it?

Joseph Daher: I would say that the acceleration of neoliberal policies with the arrival of Bashar al-Assad in 2000 had deep consequences on the Syrian social-economic situation. Obviously, you had, with Hafez al-Assad coming to power in 1970, he opposed basically the most radical of the socio-economic policies of the, if you want, the left-wing of the Ba'aths between '66 and '70. He actually imprisoned the president of Syria, who's a left-wing Ba'athist and he started the slow, what we called, '*infithah*' - opening - which was an opening in economic terms. But this opening was quite slow, in 30 years. It was mostly a state-led capitalist regime on the half of Assad with increasing liberalisation of the economy, first following the fiscal crisis of the '80s with diminishing social-economic assistance and provision to the poorer classes and popular class. In '91, first opening with a particular law of an investment but it was really

under Bashar al-Assad that you had a rapidly and deepening implementation of neoliberal policies with, sometimes, the assistance of the IMF that welcomed the policies of Bashar al-Assad. So it was privatisation of vast sectors of the economy, pushing forward what we called the non-productive sectors of the economy, especially banking, finance, luxurious real estate, tourism, leisure activities etc. against more productive sectors of the economy which were agriculture and manufacturing that suffered throughout the 2000s. And so their role diminished in the Syrian economy so you had increasing social-economic inequalities in Syria. Prior to the uprising more than 30% of the people in Syria were living under the poverty line, while just 30% of others were living just above or at the limit. So it meant that nearly 60% of people living under or close to the poverty line, while people close to Bashar al-Assad, what I call crony capitalists, meaning that they benefited from their contacts to the centres of power to accumulate capital made huge fortunes in Syria. So we had more and more difference also between the centres of cities such as Damascus and Aleppo with its more popular surrounding neighbourhoods. If you see the geography of the uprising, we can see that the popular neighbourhoods of large cities such as Damascus, Aleppo and Homs had a very important role in the uprising, such as also mid-size cities that suffered increasing lack of social services from the state in the past two or three decades.

The economy, just as other states of the region, was characterised by deepening neoliberal policies and with forms of economic opening that benefited the ruling strata, the highest strata of the society while also unemployment was also between 20 and 30%. Graduate unemployment was above this. It was an economy at the benefit of a small minority of people around Bashar al-Assad against the vast majority of the people of Syria.

Ani White: Your book is called *The Political Economy of State Resilience*, so can you talk about that, how has the state functioned in terms of its political economy when responding to the revolution?

Joseph Daher: One of the first things Hafez al-Assad, the father of Bashar al-Assad, did when he came to power in 1970 was to start the building of a very strong neopatrimonial state where the centres of power and where most of decision making power was in its hands; a very strong presidential, monarchical state. And through different means and by fostering primordial identity he divided the Syrian people. He built a very close, surrounding him, a group of military men, militias and the army, that were from very close kinship, taking also very much a sectarian colour while aligning himself as well with sectors of the

bourgeoisie such as in Damascus. This is what I was explaining, it's economic opening while also having different links to certain petit-bourgeois and some popular classes through corporatist organisations such as the General Federation of Trade Unions or the Peasant Association. Through the three decades he built this neopatrimonial power which completely transferred into a patrimonial power with the arrival of Bashar al-Assad, who in many ways *even more* concentrated the power of the state. In the hands of a few people, him and his close associates, being the family or business partners, etc while weakening also the links of the regime with sectors of the society which had historically been linked to the regime and the Ba'athists especially peasants, petit-bourgeois sectors of the society, more popular classes through corporatist organisations, such as I mentioned, the General Federation Trade Union or the Peasant Association, which of course were not instruments of emancipation of the workers and peasants. They were instruments of co-optation, control and repression but were still able, to some extent, until the 2000s, to give some forms of redistribution even though it was diminishing increasingly at the end of the '90s. You had a concentration through this complete transformation into a patrimonial power, also reinforcing the primordial identities of Syrians through various policies, instrumentalising sectarian ethnic differences as well, according to region. This is how we have to understand the repression of the Assad regime during the uprising, through its nature it should not be separated. It used different ways to repress through different instruments according to the region, sometimes through sectarian differences, ethnic differences, trying to push people against each other notably by committing crimes in mixed sectarian regions to push to a complete civil war, to make the sectarian appeal the most important.

The resilience of the regime came because of its patrimonial nature meaning also that it wasn't like the situation in Egypt or in Tunisia, that you could cut off the head and let the regime continue. The thing is, in Syria it's much more difficult, such as actually the vast majority is of the countries of the MENA region, Middle East and North Africa, where the centres of power completely concentrated. The political power being in the hand of Bashar al-Assad before the economic power but now it's a bit more debatable. Rami Makhlouf, who was the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, the military power was in the hands of the brother of Bashar al-Assad, being Maher al-Assad and other collaborators but *really* the centres of power were completely concentrated and not separated. And in addition to this - and I think this is the most important reason why the regime was able to sustain - was intervention of foreign forces, especially Iran and

Russia, which helped the regime sustain politically, economically and militarily. These were the two main reasons why the regime was able to survive until today although, as I mentioned before, with *huge* contradictions, with *huge* challenges. This does not mean that it's the end of this story. But without providing a political alternative that is inclusive, social, secular, it will be hard for these contradictions of the regime to seek to accumulate, within Syria and not only outside, forms of organisation, collaboration, to challenge once more in the future, hopefully, this regime.

Derek Johnson: Can you further discuss the role of these different powers like Russia, Turkey and the US?

Joseph Daher: Well, something must be clear, that all of them played a very negative role in Syria but let's start with the allies of the regime, Russia and Iran. Both entered on the side of the regime for geopolitical reasons mainly. Iran, very early on it intervened mainly through the Pasdaran, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, from nearly the beginning of the uprising, providing first military advice but increasingly sending thousands of Iranian individuals. Plus sending also militias, Afghan militias and Pakistani militias to combat against the different opposition armed forces while training and funding sectarian militias in Syria, whether being foreign or locally based. For Iran the most important thing was to maintain the route open basically between Tehran, Syria and Lebanon. The regime had been playing a very important role in Iran, a strategy in the region of allowing the weapons transfer to Hezbollah in Lebanon. So it was mostly for geopolitical concentration.

Russia also intervened to save one of its main allies it had in the Middle East that the time. This occurred also after Libya that was also a state with which Russia had collaboration and contracts. So Russia also wanted to maintain also an ally in the region, it was a geopolitical ally - Syria - it has been for decades. Syria used to be a big purchaser of weapons in Russia. So these two players played, as I said, a fundamental role in the regime surviving the uprising. Russian massive intervention from 2015 was definitely the game changer. The main considerations were geopolitical, but today they also want to benefit from the spoils of war and we've seen increasingly, especially Russia, through various private companies linked to President Putin, taking control of natural resources in Syria, or taking management of key installations such as the port of Tartus for Russia. Iran is a bit less benefiting from the spoils of war until now, especially because it's facing increasing internal opposition, and because of financial difficulties whether being sanctions or of its own economic policies.

When it comes to the so-called Allies of the Syrian Revolution or the Friends of the Syrian Revolution, as it was presented, as I always say, *'if you have friends like this leave them now, you can't have worse'*. But Saudi Arabi, Turkey and Qatar played a destructive role among the opposition by supporting the most reactionary opportunist elements of it. But it's important to remember also that prior to the revolution these actors were close allies or at least had close relations with the regime. Turkey and Syria had very good relations with free trade agreements. Erdogan and Bashar al-Assad spending vacations together, while Gulf monarchies were very important or the most important investors in Syria. Especially Qatar and Syria shared a very good relationship. And in the first six months of the uprising these states tried, actually, to find a solution to maintain this regime. They did not want to see it overthrown so they sought superficial reforms in Syria but Bashar al-Assad refused, while Turkey and Qatar wanted to be included in a so-called United National Government, sectors of the Muslim Brotherhood which are allies of Turkey and Qatar. As the uprising was pursued and continued, these actors saw less and less ability to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and have a friendly regime in Syria, and did not want to overthrow the regime but to change Bashar al-Assad, their objective changed, especially following Russia's intervention in Syria. For now Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf monarchies, the clear thing is that they don't want to see the influence of Iran to continue to grow in Syria. Mohammed bin Salman has said, *'we don't have any problem with Bashar al-Assad, our problem is that he doesn't become an Iranian puppet.'*

While Turkey's main issue is the Kurdish issue in Syria and the fact that the PYD, which is the sister branch of the PKK, has been able to establish areas over which it has control. Therefore Turkish effort until today has concentrated on trying to end the influence of the PYD in Syria, leading to the occupation of Afrin with democratic changes, more than 150,000 forcefully displaced by Turkish and proxy forces of Turkey, very often Syrian Islamic fundamentalist militias committing daily crimes. They play the role of furthering the sectarianism of various actors of the opposition, or towards ethnic differences and tensions between Arabs and Kurds. And Gulf monarchies furthering, by their television and media, a sectarian understanding of the regime, like Sunnis opposing minorities, especially the Alawis.

When it comes to the US, there's been a lot of myths about the US's role in Syria. First of all, we should remember that in the first weeks of the revolution Hillary Clinton declared - at the time she was US Secretary of State - that Bashar

al-Assad was a reformist and wasn't like his father, so time should be given to him to prove that he could reform, control the situation. This situation changed progressively, Barack Obama asked for the departure of Bashar al-Assad but without joining any kind of practical policy to lead to this objective. On the opposite, the main lesson that the US had from Iraq is that they don't want to change a regime, they only want to have superficial changes. They actually also prevented the sending and transfer of particular weapons to the Syrian opposition armed forces, especially when it comes to weapons that could have targeted planes and air forces. It could have helped the Syrian armed opposition, so it prevented it. The US wanted a solution in Syria with minimal changes.

And actually with the advent of the so-called Islamic state (ISIS), this changed completely the focus of the US towards ISIS-first policy. Concentrating all its forces to putting an end to the so-called Islamic state and this is where the collaboration with the Syrian democratic forces lead by the PYD started. So the US never wanted at any time to overthrow the Syrian regime, quite the opposite. Today, even though Trump has some difference with Obama, it is maintaining its main position of wanting minimum change in Syria. While the only difference might be the targeting, by Trump, of Iranian influence in Syria and this is why it is supporting very much and pushing because it has the power to intervene in Syria. Israeli strikes in Syria targeting Hezbollah and Iranian forces or supported forces. But all these actors played, in many ways, a counter-revolutionary role in Syria and never supported the aspirations of the Syrian popular classes for democracy, social justice and equality, because a democratic Syria would be a threat to the authoritarian regimes of the region and would be a threat to Israel as well. I remember very well the foreign minister Walid al-Moallem at the beginning of the uprisings in the region saying, *'the biggest threat after Iran is a democratic region in the Middle East and North Africa'*. He understood very well that if there's more democratic aspiration and more democratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa they would put more pressure on Israel again and support the Palestinian liberation movement, the aspiration of the Palestinian people, while *all* these regimes in the region have used the Palestinian issue, or have actually repressed it or want to put an end to it.

Derek Johnson: It makes me really smack my head into my hands that so many people still think the US is trying to carry out regime change in Syria.

What do you say to the refrain on sections of the left that 'the main enemy is at home' so we should not oppose the Syrian regime?

الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام



The people demand
the fall of the regime

Joseph Daher: Yeah actually it's really a shame, and it's not looking at what happened regarding US imperial policy since 2003. Obviously at the beginning of the 2000s mostly, and in the 90s we had a mostly unipolar moment, with the end of the USSR, not saying that it was a model obviously to follow, on the opposite it was a quite autocratic regime, but meaning the US was its heyday in the 90s. But following the British-American invasion of Iraq it was the beginning of, if you want, a unipolar moment for the US, in many ways. Obviously the US remains the main imperialist, military and economic power in the world, but it's not alone and it cannot act in the same way as before.

International actors have taken more importance, such as Russia, China, but also regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and obviously Israel. And the second weakening, if you want, after the defeat of the US in Iraq was the economic financial crash of 2008, and finally the uprisings in the Middle East in North Africa, that first started by overthrowing two dictators that were closely aligned to the US. All these uprisings were shaking to the US but also other regional actors.

This said, I think by using the citation of Karl Liebknecht, a very important German communist, 'the main enemy is at home' and turning it to say, we only need to focus only on our ruling class is completely not understanding his famous citation. When he said 'the main enemy is at home', which is a statement of condemnation of imperialist aggression against Russia, led by his native state of Austria-Germany, many have decontextualised it, the views of Liebknecht. Liebknecht's perspective, fighting against the enemy at home did not mean ignoring foreign regimes repressing their own people, or failing to show solidarity with the oppressed, indeed Liebknecht believed we must oppose our own ruling class's push for war, by cooperating with the proletariat of other countries, who struggle against their own imperialists.

So it does not mean erasing the Syrian people, on the opposite, it's putting them forward in your own struggle. We as leftists must support revolutionary people's struggles for struggles for self-emancipation. Again, I would like to – and this the same text, where he said 'the main enemy is at home from Liebknecht – he said: "Ally yourselves to the international class struggle against the conspiracies of secret diplomacy, against imperialism, against war, for peace within the socialist spirit. When you read this, which actually reflects a lot of the current situation in Syria – "conspiracies of secret diplomacy, against war, against imperialism, for peace within the socialist spirit" – in this perspective, none of these aspects should be excluded from our struggle to build a

progressive, leftist if you want, platform for the Syrian Revolution, but also for all the revolutions occurring, all the protest movements and uprisings.

It's very important that in the face, especially in this last few months, of increasing geopolitical tensions, instrumentalised by imperialist powers such as the US or Russia, or regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others, the struggling popular classes should remain our lodestar for progressives and internationalists around the world. Our main identity as leftists, I believe, is to be in solidarity with people struggling for freedom and emancipation. And therefore not to decontextualise, answering your question, this sentence 'the main enemy is at home', and erasing people in struggle.

Derek Johnson: You got the next one, Ani?

Ani White: Yes, thank you. We're firmly in agreement. What's the role of sectarianism in the conflict, and how do you respond to those who equate the rebels with ISIS?

Joseph Daher: So, regarding sectarianism in the conflict, sectarianism in the region has been used by the ruling strata of society, ruling classes, as an instrument to divide popular classes, as an instrument for repression, as an instrument of co-optation and control. It's a way for ruling classes, if you want, to divert class struggle, to prevent people coming out together in solidarity across sectarian differences. And this is why what we are witnessing today in Lebanon and Syria, both countries that have suffered huge sectarian tensions and crimes in the past few decades, coming out together saying 'We Are One' is very important in this aspect.

And therefore the regime has not been different, it has used, as I explained before, I mentioned this sectarianism and, since Hafez-al Assad came to power in 1970, to divide the people, to scare sectors of the society, to blame others. But, saying this, it does not mean per se that the regime is Alawi, no the regime has not served the interests of the Alawi popular classes. You find, in the ruling strata in Syria various sectarian differences... that band together because of loyalty, because of nepotism, clientelism and other forms of networks. And, again sectarianism has been used throughout the region by different regimes, to divide the people, repress, and put an end to popular movements.

At the same time, we cannot deny that also sectors of the opposition in Syria, especially Islamic fundamentalists and jihadist forces, but not only, even some liberal sectors have used sectarianism because of the lack to provide an inclusive and social and political [inaudible], so appealing to the sectarian identities of the people. But, it played

also a catastrophic role, the sectarianism of these sectors of the opposition, especially Islamic and jihadist forces, that scare not only as we often say, religious minorities in Syria, but also large sectors of the society, Sunnis or people who do not want to live in a reactionary Islamic state.

And their behaviour was also opposed in what we used to call the liberated areas, by the popular classes. And this answers, basically your second question, by saying the revolutionary forces are the same as ISIS, is not knowing the history of the Syrian uprising. Actually, the first people, even before the Syrian Democratic Forces led by the PYD, to oppose ISIS were Syrian-Arab popular classes, with the collaboration also of the Syrian-Kurdish popular classes, not only in Aleppo and various areas of the Northeast in the end of 2013, beginning of 2014, there were vast protest movements against ISIS, because of opposing their authoritarian and reactionary behaviour, but the opposition have been seen [inaudible].

And this is what I was saying, that the most important thing to not forget about the Syrian uprising, it was how it drew together vast sectors of the Syrian society that not necessarily used to meet to talk to each other, in the first two years of the Syrian uprising up to now, but in the civilian protest movement it was very, very strong, you had all the sectors of the society present. Arab, Kurds, Assyrian, Turkmen, Armenian etc, all the various sectarian differences, Sunnis, Alawis, Christian, Druze, Shia etc, and the main struggle is the Syrian people are one united, we are against sectarianism, having also social appeals, you had social solidarity between cities such as Salamiyah, which is majority-inhabited by Ismailis, with Hama, which is majority-inhabited by Sunnis. They broke the siege on Hama at the beginning of the uprising.

The Coordination Committees had democratic aspirations, the Local Councils, obviously they had limitations when it came to democratic issues, women's rights issues, minority issues, but some of them were still able to provide a democratic alternative to the regime, and to the Islamic fundamentalist forces. And people continued to oppose forces such as ISIS, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaysh al-Islam, all the Salafist forces so no, the vast majority of the uprising especially in its first years, was democratic with equality and social objectives as well. And you had many figures and personalities, groups I could cite that played a very important role in the civilian and protest movement, while Islamic fundamentalist forces and ISIS did not play this role in these Coordination Committees and Local Councils. On the opposite they established their own Local Councils to oppose the democratic actors.

And again, it was the Syrian Revolution popular classes, with the Arabs and Kurds that opposed first these reactionary actors that are a second wind of the counter-revolution. No, no, so definitely the accusation is not true, that ISIS and revolutionary forces, democratic forces are the same, quite the opposite.

Ani White: Yeah. I think it's worth noting, a lot of people nowadays strangely imply that ISIS played a role from the start, when they didn't get involved until around 2014. And as you said we've seen clashes, even through to today, so in Idlib from what I understand you've seen clashes where basically, revolutionary protestors would try and keep HTS [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham] out of their rallies, and you had Radio Fresh which was a revolutionary radio station, which was attacked by Islamist forces for having women hosting, and obviously the founder was assassinated, so those tensions are ongoing, where in the rebel regions you still have these democratic forces that will challenge the Islamists. So absolutely, I agree.

Another question, you mentioned the Community Councils [sic], can you talk about those? We understand Omar Aziz, an anarchist played a role in popularising the Community Councils [sic], can you talk about them?

Joseph Daher: Yeah, Local Councils. So the Local Councils were actually started even prior to Omar Aziz writing his piece, on the necessity to provide a political-social alternative to the state, and state institutions, which was a very famous text, I think it was end of 2011, beginning of 2012. He was an inspiration obviously for the foundation especially of Local Councils in [inaudible], which was a Damascus movement, in Duma, and other areas. But it started in areas where the regime where people disappeared, so people had to self-organise, and this is how Local Councils started to appear, and to be established in areas where the regime forces and authority had disappeared, to manage the society, the local population, provide institutions. And this started to appear end of 2011, beginning of 2012.

Obviously, as I mentioned before, not all of them were democratic. At least 50% or a bit more, throughout the time, were designated by Arab forces, or were established through consensus of local families, local tribes, or personalities of the cities, but you did have democratic experiences. As I said, there were lack of women, there were lack of religious minorities in some cases, some other issues, but they did at one point, provide this alternative, and what I call this attempt of a situation of dual power, meaning that this is one of the main characteristics of a revolutionary socialist situation, where you have an alternative political

power present [to] the state. This aspect of Local Councils were a very interesting experience, and one of the things we should remember of the Syrian uprising, or revolutionary process is this energy for self-organising despite difficulties, despite the threats coming from different sides, whether from the regime, or from Islamic fundamentalist forces, jihadist forces, which very often sought to establish their own Local Councils.

So it was really important. And we should also mention it because it also has been interesting institutions in what we call Rojava also, self-administration, although it had also some authoritarian aspects on many occasions, it was mostly controlled by the PYD but it did also have very positive characteristics, such as the secularisation of laws and institutions, women's participation and inclusion, and religious minorities also's inclusion, and some social aspects, even though this was not at the forefront.

Ani White: Yep, thanks. And it does seem like the Rojava councils, for some reason there's been a lot more attention to them than the councils in Syria.

But what role has the Syrian diaspora played since the crackdown?

Joseph Daher: Well obviously, the Syrian diaspora played a role. Obviously we have to say that is not homogeneous, it has political differences. I mean not only that you have people that are pro-regime, some people are neutral, and you have various differences among the opposition. People being supportive of conservative forces, some other being more liberal forces, some have supported various Syrian opposition forces in exile, while others (such as me) tried to support progressive actors, progressive groups within Syria.

A lot of the diaspora played an important role when it came to medical assistance, military assistance. Syrians have established lots of numbers of NGOs, of different types of organisations to come and help Syrians, you also saw various forms of organisation of political level outside as well, or helping newspapers within the country, dozens of newspapers were established, even more than 50 newspapers were established at the beginning of the uprising in Syria. Whereas before it was only... many newspapers controlled by the state, or by figures of the state.

Syrian diaspora also played a role in trying to control in trying to control the Syrian issue on the agenda of various countries, providing different discourse. Also very often now, what we see is they're playing an important role, [Syrians] living in exile, part of the diaspora, when it comes to making sure the regime's human rights violations, trying to push forward these cases in various

international or local tribunals. So, [members of the Syrian diaspora] have had different roles, and it's not homogeneous, it has its differences. Yeah.

Ani White: So the Turkish regime is now saying that Syrian refugees are able to return to their homes. What's your take on this development?

Joseph Daher: Well the Turkish regime *and* the Lebanese regime also have been trying to push refugees to go back to Syria, forcefully more often. And both countries putting their blame for their socio-economic negative situation on Syrian refugees. This is obviously not true. For the vast majority of Syrian refugees, they are not able to go back to their homes, because the war is continuing, or because the economic crisis in Syria is very hard, or because of security issues, very often you need particular permission of the security services, you need to pay various offices to reach your home, your home might have been destroyed, you're also under the threat of entering military conscription, for a man between 18 and 22 years old.

Only a small amount of Syrian refugees have come back until now, a very small amount, and this should be said. So no, the situation is definitely not allowing a safe and secure return of the vast majority of Syrian refugees for the reasons I mentioned, whether the threats of being arrested, imprisoned, being killed, there have been situations of refugees coming back to Syria and being killed or arrested, being forced to go serve in the military. So, what we witnessed a bit is some IDPs [Internally Displaced People] or, mostly refugees coming back are elderly people, or women with their children, and even these are a very small amount... so no no, the situation is not safe for people to come back to Syria.

Derek Johnson: Is the plan still being suggested by other countries, and by Syria and Russia and Turkey, to have camps within Syria, that they then send Syrian refugees back to Syria, and then they hold them in the camps, so they can figure out who's loyal, and then like you said who to conscript, etc?

Joseph Daher: For the moment, the only kind of border refugee camps you have are in the North, as Turkey is closing its border, and not only closing its borders, its *gendarme*... are even violently killing Syrian refugees trying to go to the Turkish side. They've been doing this for the past few years, they built a wall as well.

But also, in this case it's very important to denounce the role of the European Union, that has transformed the Mediterranean sea into a big cemetery. Not only of Syrian refugees, but of refugees more generally speaking, thousands of refugees are dying in the Mediterranean Sea, you have companies such as Frontex, which is a border

patrol, police patrol, security patrol, funded by the European Union, preventing refugees to reach Europe, and Europe has turned into a fortress...

In refugee camps it's catastrophic, people are even killing themselves because of the situation, it's completely overpacked, so the European Union is playing a destructive and murderous role, while still funding the Lebanese [refugee effort], the Turkish [refugee effort], in officially saying it's helping the refugees, while in Turkey only 10% of the refugees live in camps, so this money doesn't go for the refugees... so it's very important to denounce the role of the European Union in this perspective, and it's not only the extreme right-wing forces, it's also the so-called liberal [parties], the liberal right-wing [parties], having the same policy regarding this. So the most important thing [for European liberal and hard right] being for the European Union to not have a new wave, as they say, of Syrian refugees.

And Turkey has also used this in its relationship with the European Union to pressure them, on many occasions in a very racist way saying 'I will unleash another wave of refugees on you if you don't come to an agreement on these issues with me.' It's a catastrophe, regarding the refugee situation, and even though you have, especially in the European Union a very nice and superficial discourse regarding the suffering of refugees.

Derek Johnson: Why have sections of the left so singularly failed to correctly appraise the Syrian Revolution?

Joseph Daher: Well I think, first of all, we have to acknowledge the weakness of the left internationally speaking, it's [partly] a reflection of this situation. Linked to this, I think the internationalist aspect of many progressive groups, and leftist groups, has been weakening, but it also linked to the first reason. Also, it's a bit linked to the myth we mentioned in the beginning of the interview, I think a lot of the left has concentrated only on the geopolitical consideration, following very much 'campist' policies, meaning in other words that you follow a bloc, whether you're with US imperialism or against US imperialism, without looking at the struggle from below, and seeing that it's a much more complex situation.

Obviously we oppose US imperialism, but we also oppose for example Russian imperialism, or we oppose the various regional powers, whether they might have a so-called rhetoric opposing the US, which unfortunately has been understood as anti-imperialism, which it is not at all, by Iran, Hezbollah. So I think also, a lack of understanding of the various dynamics of the region, understanding of the nature of the regimes we're facing, and in this case of course much more could have been done, in

terms of international solidarity. And again I think the main reason is due to a generalised crisis of the left.

Before [the left] used to raise the internationalist flag very high, but you do have some sections of the left having a more nationalistic perspective, sovereignty etc. And taking sides with, as I mentioned before, with this or this particular 'camp' and not with the people in struggle. And this is a direct result of, I would say, weakening of class consciousness, and forgetting that all our destinies are linked. We should not forget that the beginning of the Middle East uprising inspired the whole world, the Occupy movement came out of Tahrir Square, and other forms of these kind of experiences.

Also you have some sections of the left, as I said, only focusing on Western imperialism, without trying to learn from popular struggle in the Middle East, they point to the limitation alone, without noticing that these uprisings are shaking the world. They also, these sections of the left, refuse to denounce some regional despotic regimes. And, as Lenin said, some expect a perfect social revolution – this never occurred in history, not even the Bolshevik one was a perfect, nice one without contradictions, problems etc.

This said... [for] some small sections of the left, internationalism is still very important, and I have collaborated throughout the world with various sections of the left that have supported the Syrian uprising. Not only in a rhetorical sense, but as a means to learn from certain experiences abroad, regional revolutionary experiences, revolutionary dynamics, and this is without forgetting the large participation of progressive and democratic groups and individuals occurred initially in the Syrian uprising, especially in the first years there was a lot of presence of progressives in the Syrian Revolution.

Derek Johnson: Some who despair at the left responses (I know I do), to the Syrian Revolution, say socialism is no longer relevant. Why do we continue to support a socialist political project? What relevance does this have to contemporary uprisings?

Joseph Daher: Well, especially coming from this political background, I would say it's not because Stalin claimed to be a Communist that this was communism, quite the opposite. I mean, I think, he was a form of counter-revolution against the Russian Revolution of 1917. And just as it's not because people claim to be on the left, with very bad policies and politics, that I should stop struggling for the emancipation and freedom of popular classes, within a socialist project that is internationalist, that is linking issues of oppression and exploitation, and we don't differentiate it.

And because, what is the alternative? Move to the right? I don't think the right has a better record regarding the Syrian Revolution, or at least in supporting the aspirations for democracy, social justice, and equality...

And I still believe that a socialist political project, not only for Syria, but for the whole world, is still very much of relevance, and especially when you see the crisis of neoliberalism, and the hegemony of the neoliberal ruling classes since 2008, but more particularly in the past year. We shouldn't focus only on the Middle East, but these revolts were against authoritarianism, but also against a project of neoliberalism. And we see it throughout the world, in Chile, Haiti, rising protest movements in different parts of the world, Hong Kong as well, and Catalonia, for self-determination of the people.

We see also in the US, now saying you're a socialist is not any more an insult – well depending for who obviously, but it's some things that are interesting to see – in that what the famous conservative Fukuyama said, that it was the End of History, it is not. It is not. And unfortunately, what we're seeing is that this crisis of neoliberal hegemony of the ruling class is not necessarily directly benefiting to the left or progressives alternatives, but also unfortunately to right-wing, fascistic movements or personalities, from Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Putin, we can see similar things occurring in the European Union.

We have to provide an alternative that is against these far right-wing or fascistic political actors, but also against a form of neoliberal authoritarian project, represented mostly by Trudeau, Macron, or Merkel. Both of these are enemies of the popular classes, we should be very clear, and aren't providing anything better for the popular classes. And especially when we see all the challenges, do we seek a solution from the right, from a capitalist perspective, for the ecological crisis? No, obviously not. What about the borders? They mostly all agree on transforming Europe, or all Northern countries, into a huge fortress, huge barrier preventing people that are in need to seek a better life.

So even, again as I mentioned, it's not because some claim to be socialists that we should abandon the ideals of socialism. I mean, the track record of capitalism since it became dominating the whole world, is catastrophic. Do we blame capitalists for this? No we blame the personality of people, I don't know what, etc. So no, I still believe, and I will always believe, that what we need is an internationalist socialist perspective, and that the solution is not obviously in one country but across borders, because I believe that our destinies are linked, when I see a struggle, wherever it is, I feel

it's my struggle as well, because I know if they [achieve] victories, it's also victories for our camp.

And, as also the ruling classes know that they are leading a class struggle, we should be aware of it as well. So this is why I believe that it's very much of relevance, today and more than ever with all the challenges facing the popular classes across the world.

Ani White: Yeah, when you talk about the liberal authoritarian regimes, I think of the recent stuff in Canada with the encroachment into the Wet'suwet'en territory, having Trudeau hasn't stopped that. And having Trudeau as a president hasn't stopped that.

Joseph Daher: [Also in] France, the repression of the Gilets Jaunes has been terrible, as well.

Ani White: Yep, yep. And what can people outside of Syria do to show solidarity with the Syrian Revolution?

Joseph Daher: Well, I think still many things can be done. First of all, it's on two main aspects I would say. Continue to support solidarity groups with the Syrian Revolution that have a democratic, non-sectarian and equality aspiration, and social justice as well. I think this is very important, to continue to support these groups, to support the memory of the Syrian uprising, that was strong and democratic, and had this initial aspiration. Not as you mentioned in the beginning, not portraying the Syrian Revolution today only as a geopolitical and sectarian war. Not forgetting that you had millions of people in the streets, so this is very important, having this memory being transmitted to the people, whether Syrians or others.

One of the biggest advantages, I think, of this Syrian uprising, compared to the protest movement and the resistance we had in the 70s and 80s, is that a memory has been accumulated in these past few years. That has not been the case, unfortunately, in the 70s or 80s, where you had huge strikes, strong leftist and trade union movement, this was not transmitted to the new generation of Syrians. So this is very important, to build on these experiences for future experience.

Also pursuing democratic struggles regarding the condemnation, and denouncement, of violations of human rights in Syria. For example, it's very important what happened at the end of the 2019 in Germany, where two former members of the security services were arrested in order to condemn them for violation of human rights in Syria. And I think this is very important: all criminals should be pursued for their criminal actions in Syria, but to continue to put the pressure on this aspect, to

put pressure, to know where are the disappeared, the people that were kidnapped, the political prisoners, the prisoners in general, pursuing to know what happened to them is very important.

Also what I think is important is linking these uprisings to the struggles we have in the countries we live in. Meaning that we link the refugee issue, to the socio-economic situation, to the political appeals, to the political struggles, such as struggling against Islamophobia, struggling against racism, struggling against austerity measures that attack all of us. Also making the links between these uprisings, and these causes where we live. Because a refugee that wants to be politically active, it will be very difficult to him if he's not able to have a proper job, housing, to be able to not have a document saying he can only stay a year, or he has to leave, where he's under the threat of being kicked out every minute.

And this is linked to our own political struggles for democratic and socio-economic issues. When we struggle against anti-terrorist laws it's not only about struggling against Islamophobia, more repressive policies, but it's also because these laws are used against activists, against ecological activists, against trade unionists, or against other types of activism. So I think it's very important, again as I very often say because really I believe it, that our destinies are linked.

And just understanding as well the way imperialism works. The various imperial interventions in the region, the Middle East, has not helped the people of the region. On the opposite, it has forced the problems of this country, whether by supporting directly or indirectly these authoritarian regimes, or by bombing and creating the conditions for the rise of groups such as the Islamic State, or al-Qaeda, etc. Many reasons, sectarianism, authoritarian regimes, neoliberal policies, but I think it's very important to link these two issues when continuing to show solidarity with the Syrian Revolution.

And understanding that the Syrian Revolution is not only something isolated from the rest of the uprisings also. Making links with the regional uprising, and trying also, challenging the sectarianism and ethnic tensions that are currently occurring in Syria, while putting forward a democratic and social framework.

So I would say a lot can still be done, even though the conditions are very difficult, the situation in many ways is worsening.

Ani White: Really I think, in terms of the analysis of imperialism, I really think 2011 was a set of revolutions obviously, but I think it also overturned our understanding, as any revolution does.

And so, as you say, we had these coordinates before, that it was all about the USA, but then you had these uprisings that were against various regimes whether they were officially aligned with the USA or not, so we kind of had to re-orientate, and so it's actually not all about the USA. There's a lot that I think is still to learn from that, and I agree, keeping the memory alive is a part of that.

And we'll link recommended sources [on the revolution] in the description for the episode.

Derek Johnson: Yeah, what are the next steps for your group, the Alliance of the Middle East and North African Socialists?

Joseph Daher: Well, to continue to work, we know we're still a small network, but we try to expand, to have new people contributing to the website, contributing to articles, analysis, statements, doing these kind of livestream conferences that have been I think a success, trying to do translation work as well, from Arabic, English, Persian, sometimes Kurdish if we can. Continuing to expand this small network, we don't see ourselves as going to change the whole situation tomorrow, or after tomorrow, but it's important for people to know that they can find people with internationalist aspiration, with a socialist appeal, and inclusive.

And foster debates among us that want to build something new, and better for the popular classes of the region. So even though we know we're small, we'll continue in this perspective, and bring our support as much as we can, through our work, through our different activities, to the liberation and emancipation of the popular classes of the region, and elsewhere, continue collaboration with internationalists such as you and others, this is what we think is important, while knowing that we're still a small network, but trying to do as much as we can.

Derek Johnson: Well thanks for coming on the show.

Joseph Daher: Thank you.

Derek Johnson: You're very welcome. Just a reminder for our listeners, Joseph released a book last year entitled *Syria After The Uprising: The Political Economy of State Resilience*, so be sure to check that out if you want to know more. Thank you for listening, good night, and resist.

Audio: Protestors chanting 'Asha'ab yurid izquat an nizam/The people want the fall of the regime'.

Razan Ghazzawi (2021):

"Revolutionary moments"



Transcript of an episode originally broadcast by *Where's My Jetpack* podcast, on March 15th 2021.

Ani White: Kia ora, hello comrades, and welcome to *Where's My Jetpack*, I'm Ani White.

Derek Johnson: And I'm Derek Johnson. Hola, comrades.

This month is widely recognised as the tenth anniversary of the Syrian revolution, so we're interviewing Syrian-American activist Razan Ghazzawi on women's liberation and the revolution. But first, some recs. Ani..

Ani White: We've recommended [these] before but the books *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* by Leila al-Shami and Robin Yassin-Kassab, and also, *The Impossible Revolution* by Yassin al-Haj Saleh. Both well worth reading...

Derek Johnson: ...I also want to link to *CounterVortex* by Bill Weinberg, it has some pretty good articles over there and republics. For instance this one, 'Russiagate, Syria and the Left' by Terry Burke with the Committee in Solidarity with the People of Syria (CISPOS) in Minneapolis and the website for that organisation is www.cispos.org.

Also, I want to recommend the *Bellingcat* website. They do a lot of very good content and they're constantly being attacked by tankies and Nazbols as working for the State Department or the CIA, which is a crock of shit. I especially want to recommend their piece, 'Pro-Assad Lobby Group Rewards Bloggers On Both The Left And The Right' that exposes Red-Brown propagandists for Assad monetarily rewarding them with the Serena Shim Award. There's winners like Jimmy Dore, the comedian turned toxic political commentator, who has been calling for a left-right populist alliance, like with the Boogaloo Boys. He won the award and was paid \$250,000. You can check his IRS statements, if anybody thinks that's a lie, as well as any of these other people. Visiting guests of the regime included Tulsi Gabbard and Dennis Kucinich who once ran for president of the United States.

Ani White: Yeah, and I recommend the documentary *Women of Syria: Unheard No More* by Amnesty International.

Derek Johnson: I want to also recommend a reprint that *CounterVortex* did of a piece by Leila al-Shami on 'Omar Aziz: Syrian Anarchist', which is an excellent history of an actual Syrian anarchist and the movement building he helped start with western leftists, ignoring unfortunately the Syrian local councils.

"Omar Aziz was born in Damascus, he returned to Syria, from exile in Saudi Arabia and the United States, in the early days of the Syrian revolution. An intellectual, economist, anarchist, husband and father. At the age of 63 he committed himself to the revolutionary struggle. He worked together with local activists to collect humanitarian aid and distribute it to suburbs of Damascus that were under attack by the regime. Through his writing and activity he promoted local self-governance, horizontal organisation, cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid as the means by which people could emancipate themselves from tyranny of the state. Together with comrades, Aziz founded the first local committee in Barzeh, Damascus. The example spread across Syria and with it some of the most promising and lasting examples of non-hierarchical self-organisation to have emerged from the countries of the Arab Spring. In her tribute to Omar Aziz, Budour Hassan says, he "did not wear a Vendetta mask, nor did he form black blocs"

Ani White: ...Before we move on to the interview, just a note. As well as being the official Tenth Anniversary of the Syrian Revolution, this is also the second anniversary of the Christchurch shooting in Aotearoa New Zealand when a far-right terrorist targeted two mosques and took out fifty people. Some of those attacked were themselves Syrian refugees. We remember the dead and fight for the living.

We also have another bonus episode released today with video essayist Byron Clark on

the far-right in Aotearoa/New Zealand.³

...We're interviewing Razan Ghazzawi on the Syrian Revolution. Razan is an award winning human rights defender, blogger, exiled Palestinian Syrian U.S. based scholar activist and a doctoral researcher in gender studies at the University of Sussex. Her thesis looks at different forms of mobilisation of queerness in the context of the War on Terror in the Syrian war. Ghazzawi was detained twice by the Syrian state and was exiled by Al-Qaeda and ISIS groups in Northern Syria. She is the founder of the Feminist ArQives and a co-founder of the Karama Bus project in Idlib.

Welcome to the show and thanks for coming on.

Razan Ghazzawi: Thank you for having me!

Ani White: So, can you tell us about the early days of the revolution, which is sort of widely talked about as beginning ten years ago today?

Razan Ghazzawi: Thanks for that. Well, a lot to be said about those moments. I like to talk about them as moments because it's really a very different form of protest. When it started in Tunisia and Egypt a lot of people in Syria, at least where I was in Damascus and the people around me - I'm talking about some bloggers, because there was blogging at that time, some film makers, some artists - so me and the community around me really wanted to protest and really wanted to be on the streets. We did start a solidarity protest - and this is a very important idea; how the protest started in Syria. We started in solidarity, in Damascus at least, with the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Then throughout these protests and throughout these, let's not say protests but these solidarity sit-ins really, it kind of shifted towards more of a protest demanding the state itself to condemn what happened in Dara'a, for example, on the 18th of March (2011) when children were tortured and some of them were tortured to death. Like Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb and others because they were drawing graffiti on their school. The idea of advocating for children's rights is an essential ideal when we're thinking about the protests in Syria and also when we're thinking about the protesting in Syria in those earlier days we also need to be thinking about solidarity as a notion not just within the Syrian state or geography but also across North Africa and the West Asia region.

I wanted to quickly talk about the debate that's been happening, like: 'when did the revolution start in Syria?' There's a big debate which is referred to as a kind of a city-centred debate or a city-centred side or one is more of a suburb-centred side in

the sense. That some people would say, "oh no, the protests started in February in Damascus" and others would say, "no, actually the protest started in Dara'a." which is the periphery, outside the centre. I'm finding the either / or narratives or either / or solutions... it doesn't have to be either / or. We can say, "protests developed in different ways in Damascus" then how would they develop in Dara'a. We can just easily embrace the protests that happened in Damascus as well as Dara'a and this is kind of my approach, that we really cannot say that the protests, the sit-ins, the movement that happened in Damascus we should erase them just because it's the centre, because it has a different kind of symbolism against the state. Which it's more difficult to protest in Damascus, the capital, than it was in Dara'a. So in that sense this is how I personally view the earlier days of the uprising.

Ani White: You were imprisoned twice, triggering an international solidarity campaign. Can you talk about that?

Razan Ghazzawi: Yeah. I mean, I was in detention in prison at the time and I remember in prison and detention, as was the case in a lot of authoritarian military states, you're in prison or detention, you're cut out of outside information. You don't know what's happening outside, so I had no idea there was an international solidarity campaign until I was released. When I was released I remember I logged in to my Facebook and I saw a lot of people adding me as a friend request and I was a bit overwhelmed with the solidarity campaign. I'm very thankful from my readers and my friends, bloggers, because I've been blogging since 2005 in Damascus. I also started in Arabic but then I shifted into English because there was a lot of bullying from how I was talking a lot about sexual harassment and LGBTQ content. So I was not able to write in Arabic and I shifted into English and I think that shift made me more accessible to a wider readership and I think that affected why there was a huge campaign, I guess. I'm very thankful and at the same time I have used that access to talk about other detainees.

Derek Johnson: Thank you for sharing that.

Your research concerns the role of the LGBT struggle in the Syrian revolution. Can you talk about this?

Razan Ghazzawi: Yeah, so This is an ongoing process. I am personally more looking into the idea of surveillance. How do we think about surveillance and how do we think about security in Syria? When we think more about those issues from a perspective of an LGBTQ positionalities

³ All the above recommended resources are linked at tinyurl.com/syria-blog

and subjectivities. So how do people who actually have different or non-normative gender or sexual identities and expressions, how do they experience check points? In my thesis I focus on check points because they were an emergent form of surveillance that appeared and occurred in the uprising. They were used by the state to hunt down protesters and they wanted to close the connections, the bridges between certain neighbourhoods. They were collaborative in terms of aid, in terms of smuggling activists who were wanted.

So there's a lot of forms of solidarity, also forms of activism that happened across neighbourhoods, across cities and suburbs, and the check points were really there to cut and rupture those connections. So this is what I'm trying to do in my thesis. Through the life histories, interviews and ethnographic research, I'm trying to capture those kind of nuances. What happens when we think about check points from the perspective of a trans woman or someone who's a femme gay or a butch or any person who's just for the first time in a direct, well, not the first time really but let's say there's different interactions depending where you are with the state

Some of my interlocutors tell me that in Latakia no one would talk to you if you look gay, whatever that means. People in Damascus would have different stories to tell about that. There's more security, there's more surveillance. So I'm trying to look at all of those connections and debates, and seeing how they connect together. I'm still in a writing up process so I'm all over the place with my topic and my thesis. It takes some time to make sense of everything.

Ani White: And it's not something that I've seen a lot of writing on or discussion of, is the role of LGBT struggle in the revolution. So, I understand that. I'm in the middle of my PhD myself so it can be hard to talk about it mid-stream, but it's good to get an impression of where you're at with that research. Very interested to see how that turns out.

But can you talk about the phases of militarisation and how that has affected women in the revolution?

Razan Ghazzawi: Yeah. This is also a debate about the phases of the militarisation and I would say there's a mainstream debate, a mainstream perspective, a general idea that people had to carry arms and to protect themselves. I do think this is correctly part of the narrative, this is essentially very important, yes. People did. The Syrian state have used, monopolised, and weaponised every single element of the state - the state infrastructure, the state hospitals. There was no safe space to go to. The campus was not safe. I have colleagues who have been tortured to death on campus. I have friends who have been disappeared on universities... Students were beaten on campus. There was really no sense of safety in any state institution during the uprising and this is early on. People were protesting; students, workers, and the state increasingly started to use weapons, thugs and also escalated. This is what pushed some communities to defend themselves and I think this is a very important acknowledgement to say that communities did want to protect their communities from the Syrian state army.

But also at the same time I'm really worried about just talking about this narrative because even though it is true it is not the full story. I



think the reason why we need to talk about how communities defend themselves [is that] we need talk about what do other players in the region and worldwide benefit from putting arms in, let's just say, some of the communities who are eager to defend themselves.

So I think this is why I think it's very important to be critical from the early on to the role of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and also Turkey. The Muslim Brotherhood specifically did want to try to gain political grounds by militarisation and by putting arms in the hands of some of the revolutionaries on the ground. This kind of narrative when we're talking about the state violence and how communities were trying to protect themselves I think it's very important to remember the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, the role of the Gulf, the role of Erdoğan also trying to push for militarisation to co-opt the uprising. I think this is where I disagree with some of the experts and some of the diaspora-based experts on Syria, who see only one narrative and are trying to romanticise the struggle as if we were just pushed toward militarisation. It's not exactly the full truth; people were also trying to resist militarisation and trying to stick to non-violence because they knew and they understood this is not the strength of the movement. But, you know, things get complicated and this is why they were bullied - non-violent, anti-violent - and also some of them like [unknown], for example, who's really a visionary. Also Razan Zaitouneh and others who've been really visionary feminists and visionary human rights advocates and writers who would see that while we need to defend ourselves, at the same time we need to be careful of how militarisation would effect, not only women, but also communities in the long-run. This is true, as you said with your question, a lot of the people - I don't identify as a woman, I identify as nonbinary femme - but we can say that a lot of the people who are non-normative, they are not cis men, they are not macho. Also, masculinities, even femme masculinities were also not welcomed to be part of the uprising. So it is something that a lot of challenges that social movements go through and it's only the nuances and the people from within the movement who are wary about these conflicts that need to really be advocating how to get out of them and how to address them rather than to just sugar-coat them and romanticise them.

So yeah, I think that we have a lot of work to do on that front, of how to really trace how the militarisation of the movement did affect communities in the long-run and farmers and workers and nonconforming people. Not just politically but also in gender, racially and class-wise. So this is a debate that is very important to think about when we think about militarisation.

Derek Johnson: How did the revolution become sectarianised?

Razan Ghazzawi: It's a big question. I definitely cannot answer that fully but I personally would say when we're thinking about social movements, new spaces emerge and new spaces open and that made a lot of people want to co-opt that space. I think this is what happened. What happened is a lot of people, like for example, Adnan Al-Aroor. Al-Aroor is a personality, a character. He's a public figure who used really his money and his connections to disseminate really sectarian discourse early in the uprising. That's what made a lot of people actually withdraw, critical and scared to join. Specifically people who are also scared of movements in Syria. At the time there was a lot of people who wanted to talk about the danger and harm of this discourse and there were a lot of efforts to combat this hatred but again with the militarisation things got really out of control. This is the curse of militarisation, that you have little space, you don't have as powerful tools to convince or rather to combat this extremist, takfiri that I'd like to call them, movement.

I think that sectarianism is something that we need to - and I would say racism, patriarchy and classism - they all need to be thought about specifically as anti-revolutionary, as counter-revolutionary culture and that we really need to think about challenging.

Ani White: Yeah, I think there's a case to be made that there's two forms of counter-revolution that have occurred. Obviously the brutal counter-revolution from the Assad regime but then the issue of the internal counter-revolution and that's maybe a more difficult question in a way.

Can you talk about the Kurdish struggle?

Razan Ghazzawi: So, I am personally someone who - I mean, this is a very important thing to say - I am learning. I am learning, I am someone who has been living under military dictatorship all my life. I was isolated from the Kurdish struggle. We were brought up to believe we were all Arabists and we were all Arabs, so the idea is very new to me personally as someone who is learning about my communities and different communities that are living in Syria. I do not see myself as an expert but what I can say is that what I've learned from the Kurdish struggle in Syria.

From early on in 2012 when the F.S.A. [Free Syrian Army] had started to gain control, there was a case, I don't remember when, but in 2012 when the F.S.A. wanted to get into Kurdish areas and Kurdish dominated villages I remember a lot of people I respect on Facebook, they shared posts saying that this is very dangerous. When the Arab-backed revolutionaries would go into Kurdish

dominated areas under the pretext of liberating it, that that would create a lot of tension in the long run. I think this is a very important sensitivity that a lot of the Arab revolutionaries do not reflect on. There's a lot of hatred, a lot of racism.

I'm talking as someone within the movement. I'm not talking about, you know, a lot of diasporic conversation and debate about the Kurdish struggles is very much ethno-Orientalist, I would say. This is something I talked about in my article and Al Jazeera English, is how to be critical of social movements but at the same time but also careful of how this could lead into hatred towards the Kurds. For example, in an Arabist culture that the Assad regime had been advocating and the anti-Kurdish and anti-Indigenous practices that had been happening in Syria against the Kurds and against the Indigenous communities.

We're talking also about Assyrians, we're talking about a lot of Indigenous communities. This is an historical oppression of Kurds; not to use their language, not to use their culture, not to have their children to be named their Kurdish names. They had to be named Arabic names. They cannot own, they cannot work. All of these struggles that the Syrian Kurdish people have suffered long before Hafez [al-Assad] came. This is also important to say, it's something that Arab opposition, Arab revolutionaries, don't think about as much and I think we have a lot more work to learn about each other. This is revolutionary work when you dismantle a dictatorship and a military in a way that you would reflect on your own privileges as someone who is an Arab in Syria. Let's just say that privilege is not really the right word here but more access than the Kurdish citizens or stateless, actually, people. That is very important revolutionary thinking that we don't do as much.

Ani White: And what role have the various international states played in Syria?

Razan Ghazzawi: I call it the War on Syrians. It's just a war on the people in Syria. In the partition, the conflict, the proxy-war - it's a co-optation of the movement. It is how a popular movement, how a just movement, has turned into a war and how people who have been protesting with so much agency and so much energy to think about the future and to build a future, and how it is today facing the consequences of the war methods that Assad and their allies have started and chose.

Ani White: There are obviously so many states that have played various roles.

Razan Ghazzawi: That's a big question really.

Derek Johnson: Yeah, that's been the big problem and I think that's played into a lot of the reactionary

propaganda of writing off the revolution as just proxy wars and the U.S. or somebody just doing a regime change and that kind of talk.

What remains of the democratic revolution either in Syria or the diaspora?

Razan Ghazzawi: This is where I like to talk about revolutionary moments, not a revolution that has a time-frame of when it began and when it ended. I'm not really in favour of thinking about revolutions like that, I'm thinking about revolutions as a constant movement. It happens. Protesting in Damascus in 2011 in March or February, this is how protest was but now ten years later it could be something else, it does not mean it ended. People have changed forever. I have the very strong belief that people who protested once in front of scary powers, military and states, I do believe that people who have done that are always protesters.

As a PhD student I protested against my first supervisory team. I know a lot of students in my school did not do that. So when I hear the stories of students who are scared to change their supervisory teams because this is how academic work happens - you just have to accept, you just have to deal with it. But I did not. And because I protested once I will always protest, whether in academia or any other place or space. This is why I don't think the revolution ended, I feel that people are creative. They have different forms of protest. This is true. I feel that today a lot of communities care about their children, they care about their relatives, they care about sending support and solidarity, caring about 'let's just help my friend to get to Europe'. All these forms are forms of protest.

This is why my PhD looks at nonbinary ways of protest. How can we think about protest away from the mainstream idea that a revolution only happens inside the country or only happens when there's people marching in the street. I'm not saying that I am positive about the future, I'm definitely ten years older than I was before. I'm also very tired and I'm very burned out. I'm still healing from the past ten years. A lot of people are like that. I just feel like I'm a different person and I'm only talking about myself. And I am a stubborn person and I feel like a lot of people are like that. I do feel like people who are healing and they're taking a break, they will make other revolutions in the next ten years.

Ani White: Yeah, it's been good to see the recurrence of some of these uprisings, in Lebanon as well.

You've worked with Raed Fares of Radio Fresh in Idlib and he was assassinated by Al-Qaeda, and you had your own troubles with Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Northern Syria. Can you tell us about this?

Razan Ghazzawi: After my release and second detention I decided to leave Damascus because I was burned out from detention and I could not do it again. I was told that I was wanted for a third detention because of, as I was explaining to you, the work we were doing with Leila and Ana Uday in between in Yarmouk Camp in Damascus, specifically around medicine and aid. So after I decided to go to Kafr Nabl, in Idlib, Raed told me, 'you can stay, you can do your work', I decided to co-found the Karama Bus project, which is a psychosocial support project. It provides alternative education to IDP children - Internally Displaced children. In Idlib in the area at the time, we're talking about - I went there in December 2012 - and I stayed there until the end of 2013. So we're talking pretty much in the whole of the 2013 year. So the area at the time it was newly liberated, a lot of families had left their villages and they went to take shelter in schools. So there was a large number of families living in schools and a large number of children who did not go to schools and also they did not have access to play. So what we did is that we were a bus of four people and we used to go to six villages in Idlib.

We had a projector, we screened cartoons, songs, we also played sport with the kids. We used to go there around sunset, so there was a little bit of sun there, we played sport and then we'd start preparing to screen some cartoons. We'd stay there like for like couple of hours and we'd go back home.

So that kind of movement everyday, everyday, everyday for a week. It kind of brought some headache from ISIS, which was towards the middle and the end of 2013. I started to get people coming over to say - I was not veiled at the time, I refused to wear the veil. And I used to get people coming to me, to my office, telling me that, 'Sister, you need to put your veil on. It's provoking people.' And of course, when I say provoking people, we're not talking about communities. People working with me, families and their mothers and their kids are all accepting. It's just that ISIS and Al-Nusra, and also, I have to say, F.S.A. were not accepting of me at the time, of me being like a non-conforming female assigned at birth and who's non-veiled. So, that was on the one hand, and the second hand, also Raed, he was very much vocal against extremists. He was very much



an advocate of secularism. He used to talk about that and used to draw Kafr Nabl banners. So there was a lot of tension in the air - what we wanted and, at the same time, what was the power on the ground and how it's changing due to militarisation.

What happened afterwards is really me and Raed were on a tour. Towards the end of 2013 in the US we're trying to speak about Syria, speaking about Kafr Nabl, we're talking about our work and then we hear that our colleagues in Kafr Nabl were raided by ISIS; were raided and they were kidnapped. Our toys, our tools were confiscated. Our laptops, our projector, that I was just telling you about, it was all confiscated by ISIS. Even the toys were smashed and broken, our offices were broken. This is why it wasn't I'm able to go back to Kafr Nabl after this raid. This happened after several times of people coming to Raed and coming to my office to kind of warn us about our discourse. So that's when Raed told me, 'Razan, you should not come back unless you are veiled'. That's what he said and that's when I decided I'm not going to be coming back veiled. Raed survived the first assassination attempt. That was in early 2014. He remained underground, not even going to his place, not even seeing his kids and his wife. He remained underground for two years, escaping ever since that assassination attempt until he was killed with Hammoud in 2018 while I was doing my PhD fieldwork in Beirut, Lebanon, at the time.

Raed is someone who, I call him an intellectual and a community organiser. There's so much to be written about Raed and people like Raed. I don't think, even though a lot has been said about Raed I don't think he's been appreciated enough; what he did and what he done.

He was a mayor, in my view. He was a Kafr Nabl mayor, he was an excellent mayor. He knew how to internationalise Kafr Nabl in a way to talk about the solidarity of the revolution. Kafr Nabl was one of the earliest villages to be in solidarity with the Kurdish struggle. I do not endorse all of their banners. Some of their banners, I think I disagree with. We want to we don't want to romanticise each other's work as well. I mean, I'm very critical of romanticisation and making people look perfect. We're not perfect. We have a lot of issues we need to talk about. But for the most part, we did our best and Raed, he was a mentor that I still reflect on his leadership and his wisdom.

Ani White: Thanks for sharing that.

Are there strong connections between women's groups in the Middle East and North Africa and are there any kind of internal tensions?

Razan Ghazzawi: Yeah, I like to think about women's groups that they're not homogenous groups. Definitely not every woman is a progressive woman, not every woman is a feminist. So, for example, I'm right now reading a book by Bouthaina Shaaban and she talks about Damascus diaries. She only talks about Assad and the peace process. So a state feminist, like Bouthaina Shaaban, or like, a right wing feminist, you know, this is also part of the women's movement in the region. You have a lot of, also, right wing feminists in the uprising, of course. Woman groups are like huge groups, there are a lot of groups. In Syria, they are over, I don't know, I cannot really count any more. I mean, the last time I checked, there was over 150 groups. So one of the groups I remember, their goal was to combat homosexuals in Idlib. So you see what I'm saying? There's different movements or different dimensions or different struggles or different discourses really. I would say NGOisation of the movement is pretty much part of that. Definitely there are different not just internal conflicts. I would say it's more political conflicts, more political, different positionalities. What kind of feminist or women's movement that is going to advocate for the rights of the stateless, the rights of refugees, the rights of single moms, of IDPs, of sex workers? What kind of women's movement or feminist movement is working on also talking about Palestine as an essential kind of struggle?

Derek Johnson: Yeah, it seems to seem to be that kind of complication everywhere.

Can you talk about the relationship between the Syrian revolution and other international struggles such as the Palestinian struggle?

Razan Ghazzawi: Yeah. For some reason, there's a contested relationship between the Palestinian struggle and the Syrian revolution. I think the Syrian opposition make it difficult because they're reactionary. A lot of the Syrian opposition and I would say some of the mainstream revolutionaries are a bit reactionary when it comes to Palestinian struggle because they see it as, 'How has Assad co-opted anti imperialist struggle?' He wanted to say that 'I am the person who would support Palestine. So you have to be okay with everything I do so that we continue supporting Palestine, or be anti Zionism or anti imperialist'. And in doing so there's no human rights whatsoever. Now the Syrian opposition, they came and said, 'Okay, we don't want to talk about Palestine anymore. We don't want to talk about the centrality of Palestine. We don't care about Palestine, we care about us. Syria first.' Even some of them would want to talk to Israel. Actually some of them went to Israel. I will say some of the

Syrian gays even went to Israel and some of the Syrian gays in Berlin they're also practising normalisation with Israeli artists and performers.

So it's really interesting that what Hafez al-Assad and Bashar did, they created a reactionary movement within the social movement towards Palestinian struggle. A lot of Syrians I feel are reactionary, kind of like really fed up with Palestinian struggle and I think this is what's alarming. This is the work of intellectuals that we need to be very aware of what states push us to because of the way they co-opt struggles they push us to think about struggles the way that they do. That actually made a lot of, unfortunately, some of the Palestinians, let's just say, [unknown] for example, in Chicago where I am right now. His discourse, for example, is very problematic towards the Syrian revolution. So because he very much believed the discourse of the Assad regime, he believed the state's discourse. He does not want to listen to people's discourse. So you have all of these kind of public figures in the Palestinian movement, unfortunately, who would believe what Assad is saying.

You have at the same time the Syrian opposition. They would be reactionary to what Assad has done and is doing. You would have these two not trying to push more of a collaborative solidarity discourse between the two struggles or trying to really obstruct that solidarity. So this is why the work of grass-roots was important here and the work of intellectuals, artists and activists is to kind of remember how our struggle is different. Well, it is different, because, you know, settler colonialism is different from Assad, right? I mean, we're not to say we're the same. But at the same time, because we live different struggles, because we have different oppressions it is important that we have this solidarity. I think that also this is something to work on, hopefully, in the future.

Derek Johnson: So what is to be done?

Razan Ghazzawi: Personally speaking I'm looking at being a teacher. I feel like I have gained so much insight and I have had been through experiences and met so many amazing people the past ten years. I've learned so much and I've made so many mistakes that I'm reflecting on. I'm learning so much about self-care and learning so much about burnout, and my limitations and my capabilities, and also self-love. I have to thank a lot of the Black feminists who have been writing about these issues a long, long time ago. So personally I would say, reading about other people's struggle, other people's work so that we learn how to communicate our struggle. That's a lot of work and we need to be more creative, I feel, not just to continue to produce the same old.

I feel like there's a lot of repetition happening, especially now with the Ten Years Anniversary. We're going to keep on continuing romanticisation, continuing celebrating the heroics of our uprising and I'm really at the point of, that's really nice but let's just talk mistakes now. Let's just talk what can be done. How can we think about the kids who have not experienced anything but camps so far? We have so much youth that are really struggling with paperwork they're not even able to settle down, they're not able to continue their studies. I'm really worried about the children and the youth of the region in Syria, in Yemen, in Palestine, in Lebanon.

I think about them a lot. I think this is one of the reasons why I want to be a teacher and why I'm doing my PhD is because I wanted to bring all of this insight to the academy. Academy has been learning, slowly, about the struggle but they're a bit stuck with their buzz words.

You know, 'Arab Spring' and 'counter-insurgency'. I'm just thinking about how to create different curriculums, how to create different knowledge production that is very much closer to communities. To also give them tools to communicate their own struggles and how to support their work, if that makes sense?

Ani White: Yeah, absolutely - building those connections.

Thanks for coming on the show and sharing where you're at with everything.

Razan Ghazzawi: Thank you so much for having me. I hope I made sense! I felt like some of the stuff I said maybe did not make sense.

Derek Johnson: No, it made a lot of sense. Thank you.

Ani White: Yeah, I understand we're in the process of figuring things out and it was good to hear where you're at with that.

Razan Ghazzawi: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Ani White: Thanks.

As always, listeners, if you found this useful please donate to our Patreon at www.patreon.com/jetpack1917 also please drop a review at Apple Podcasts. Thanks for listening.

Derek Johnson: Solidarity! And we'll see you, in the future.



Yasser Munif (2022):

"Looking at the revolution from below
is extremely important"



Transcript of an episode originally broadcast by *Where's My Jetpack* podcast, on March 15th 2022.

Ani White: Kia ora. Welcome, comrades, to *Where's My Jetpack*?! a politics and pop culture podcast with sci-fi and socialist leanings. This month we've got an interview with Yasser Munif on the Syrian revolution, once again on the anniversary of the revolution. So Yasser Munif is a Syrian academic and activist, and associate professor of Sociology at Emerson College. He teaches courses about colonial history, racial identities, social movements, Middle Eastern politics, and feminist theories. He is the co-founder of the Global Campaign for Solidarity with the Syrian Revolution and his book, *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death*, which will be mainly discussing here, was published in 2020. So welcome to the show, Yasser.

Yasser Munif: Thank you for inviting me. Thank you for the opportunity.

Ani White: Yeah, thanks for coming on. So first, a general question. What are the key things people need to know about the Syrian revolution?

Yasser Munif: So the Syrian revolution obviously started in 2011 with a number of other revolts in the region and I think the entry point, the most important to understand about the revolution in Syria is that it's both a simple and complex process. Simple in the sense that there is a long history of violence in Syria that didn't start in 2011, but rather we could trace back to the rise to power of the Ba'ath Party in the 1960s, in addition to dire economic context, crisis, since the 1980s, but also since 2000. So it was common sense that people would rise up and oppose this dictatorship in 2011. I think that's an important entry point to understand that there was a lot of resentment, a lot of coercion to the population, marginalization,

high unemployment rates, and so on. It was logical for large segments of the population to oppose and to resist the Assad regime.

On the other hand, it's also a very complex revolution in the sense that many actors were involved at different stages of the revolt with their own interests, with their own logic. So, for example, Saudi Arabia and Iran were involved and in a certain way were fighting each other and using Syria as a proxy to face each other. There is also the opposition between the Kurdish politics and Turkey, and US and Russia and so on and so forth. I mean, there are a number of layers that complexify any understanding of the revolution very quickly. So what I propose usually is that we begin with that simple entry point to understand that people revolted for obvious reasons, like many other populations in the region.

The second thing I would say is that one cannot really understand the Syrian revolution without understanding its connection to the entire region, the Arab region or the Middle East and Northern African region. There was an authoritarian order in that region that was more or less stable in the past several decades, at least since the 1960s. For many of them, dictatorships that were run oftentimes by families, whether that's Egypt or obviously Saudi Arabia or Jordan and the same thing in Morocco and so on, or a ruling party that became very much once again run by a small clique or even a family, like in Syria or in Iraq up until the US invasion, or Algeria. So it's important to understand that those revolts are very much interconnected in the same way as the revolt of the socialist camp after 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and therefore we should understand them in their globality as interconnected and the impact of each one of them on the others.

Thirdly, I would say that it's very important to really focus on the grassroots politics and not reduce those revolts to the geopolitical dimension. And I'm sure we'll have an opportunity to talk more about that. But oftentimes people have a tendency to jump to the geopolitical aspect of those revolts and ignoring or dismissing the grassroots politics, which is, I think, central in any understanding of the Syrian revolt, but also the Arab revolts in general.

Ani White: Yeah, and for an example of those grassroots politics, you spent a few months in the city of Manbij during the revolution. Can you describe the revolutionary process there?

Yasser Munif: Yes. So Manbij is a city located in Northern Syria, close to the Turkish border and I chose it because it was more accessible for me at some point. I couldn't go back to Damascus. Initially, I started going to Damascus,

but then my name ended up being on some list and it became more risky to go to the areas controlled by the Assad regime.

So Manbij was liberated in July 2012 and was run by a Revolutionary Council and was a very interesting case study to me. I mean, I wanted to go and see for myself what is happening and how the revolution really takes place in the everyday life. And so it was a really important trip in a certain way because there were a number of initiatives happening in the city. People were trying to make the city liveable despite the amount of violence against the city, either through bombardment or through siege. Oftentimes it's very difficult to even get bread or other type of food, medication and what have you. There was also a large number of refugees in the city. And so all these aspects made the running of the city more challenging. There were almost 200,000 refugees or internally displaced people, which is approximately equal to the population of Manbij. And all these people needed housing, access to medical health care. They needed food, schooling for their children and so on.

So it's within that kind of context that people were actively trying to recreate many of those institutions that are essential for the survival of the population in those areas. I think oftentimes those examples, those struggles are ignored. They don't necessarily end up on the front pages of the international media. First, because it's very difficult to access those areas. Second, it requires spending more time and getting to know the population and who's doing what and the different groups operating on the ground and so on. So it requires more time and that's not something that many journalists are able to do.

So my experience there was extremely interesting in the sense that one begins to understand how revolution really operates. It's oftentimes a very chaotic process. Oftentimes people learn by trial and error. It's an iterative project of the revolution. Looking at the revolution from below is an extremely important thing for people who want to understand those processes. So I was able to gather a lot of stories from people who were either trying to reopen the school to get the kids to go back to school, despite the challenges, despite the Syrian regime bombarding the school and preventing people from going back there or providing bread and the politics of bread and how all that operates and so on. So it was an important opportunity for me to observe the revolution from below, to see the everyday life of people resisting and trying to rebuild from the destruction that the Syrian regime imposed.

Ani White: Yeah, thanks for that. In your book, you talk about the Syrian revolution

representing a micropolitics of life against a macropolitics of death, or necropolitics. Can you explain what that means for our listeners?

Yasser Munif: Yeah. Again, there was a lot of writing about the Syrian revolution, and oftentimes I felt that what people highlighted really was the geopolitical aspects and international relations and so on. So I wanted to shift the focus and try to highlight other aspects that are not necessarily very visible in the mainstream media, or even among certain academic circles, or even among activists. So I used this, I would say, theoretical tool, micropolitics and macropolitics, or what I would call also the politics of life against the politics of death, which is, I think, a really useful way to think and look at this revolution.

So what I mean by the micropolitics, or the politics of life, are all these micro processes, the everyday resistance and the minutiae of building alternatives that oftentimes are very decentralised. So people began their involvement in the revolution by organizing at the level of their neighbourhood, among family members, because those are the people you trust and their villages. Because Syria was very violent, I mean, the regime was very violent in Syria, the political parties were almost nonexistent. So when the revolution started, there was no structure, no leadership to lead the revolutionary process. So this is why it was a very decentralised process. So what you find in one place, for example, in Manbij, is very different from what you will find in other regions, either because of the demographic composition of the population or the urban texture of the city or the neighbourhood or sometimes because of the large presence of the military. In some areas, the activists were much more prepared and much more democratic and therefore they were able to build a much more solid alternative and so on.

So it's through that process of politics of life, observing what people are doing on an everyday basis to again rebuild those institutions and the effective networks that people build to communicate among each other, either through social media or other ways or sometimes using art even to resist. And I think that's another dimension that is oftentimes marginal. People don't pay much attention to it. But in some of the areas, it was almost impossible to organise a protest. For example, people in the beginning would put red paint in the fountains, to remind everyone that maybe there are no protests because of the security and the military and so on. But there is something like a rebellion brewing, or people sometimes with through ping pong balls, with messages from a hilltop in some of the neighbourhoods that would go to different places downhill. And so people would find those ping pong balls and

read the message, and so on and so forth. So there was a lot of creativity. It's only through those minimalist kind of observations one can begin to understand the revolutionary process.

On the other hand, to understand what the regime was doing. I felt that it was important to look at death as a major entry point, and I think by doing that, we can understand the state logic and how the Syrian regime was regulating its forces, by looking at how it can impose more violence and more death and so on. So the book is really structured around those two processes, the macropolitics or micropolitics, and the politics of life and the politics of death. One can, I think, understand the revolution better by using those frameworks. In a certain way it's a way to decolonise theory, because I think a lot of the social sciences are oftentimes Eurocentric and inadequate to understand what's happening in our region and the Arab world. For example, a lot of the social movement theory, the new social movement theory was developed in a European context where social movements can operate, they can formulate demands to the state, and there is a public sphere and so on and so forth. All that doesn't exist in the Arab region. So using a social movement theory, for example, to understand what's happening in Syria is not appropriate. This is why I was trying to develop alternative tools, theoretical tools, to understand, on the one hand, the violence of the Syrian regime, but also the creativity of the people who are building alternatives, and fighting for a politics of dignity from below.

Ani White: Thanks for that. You argue that the prison is the central pillar of necropower or the politics of death. Can you explain how that works?

Yasser Munif: Sure. One cannot really understand Syrian history or politics without understanding the rule of prisons in it. Mustafa Khalifa, for example, explained that Syria's history is the history of prisons, concentration camps, and massacres. And that's very accurate. If we look at the way that the Syrian regime, the Ba'ath Party and Assad rose to power - it was through a coup. And Syria has also a history of coups. Some historians would argue that they were up to 19 different coups, depending on how you count them and so on. So when Assad took power, he wanted to build a coup-proof regime or state, and one of those central institutions to help him do that was obviously the prison. So the Syrian regime imposed an equation in Syrian society where violence really played a central role. and the Syrian regime imposed that politics of fear where one has to always be on guard and be careful. and you end up in the end self-censoring, and people avoid any kind of talk about politics. I remember even hearing from people that one should not talk about the price of vegetables, tomatoes, and what

have you in public transportation because that could be understood or interpreted as a critique of the regime. So that was the level of violence. So obviously only a small portion of the population was incarcerated in prison and was experiencing the violence and the torture of the Syrian prison, which are notorious on a global scale. Only a few places really compare to the Syrian prison where oftentimes people died under torture. The Syrian regime developed the whole carceral knowledge and strategies to better torture prisoners, either to humiliate them or to get information and all that to impose that politics of fear and create this narrative that anyone can end up being there.

So the Syrian regime was not necessarily interested in preventing stories from leaking from the inside to the outside. On the contrary, it wanted the Syrian population to know to a certain extent about what's happening in places like Tadmor or Sednaya, the massacres that happened and so on, not too much, but enough to scare the population. And so the Syrian prison obviously has its own specificity. It's very different from the US prison system or other prison systems in - how should I call that? - in highly developed capitalist countries where the prison, like in the US, plays an economic role and is connected to the economic institutions, and in a certain way allows the state to accumulate and to punish any surplus population or unemployed population like in the US with the Black and the Brown population. In Syria, it doesn't necessarily have that economic incentive. On the contrary, in Syria the prison costs the state money and it's not necessarily productive in the way that it is in the US. So it fulfils a different role, which is, as I mentioned, producing that politics of fear and making sure that everyone is on their guard and making sure that there is no opposition, because there is always that possibility of ending in prison.

As a result, Riad al-Turk, who is one of the important leftist intellectuals and political leaders called Syria the 'Kingdom of Silence', because of the central role that prisons really played. There is a whole literature in Syria called the prison literature. And that's also true in the region, I should say, because there are some similarities between prison in Syria and, say, in Iraq and in Egypt and so on. So this is why I think it's very important to put that institution, in any analysis, in a central position to really understand the way that the Syrian regime operates, and the way that it projects this image of force and coercion and violence.

Ani White: I think it's also perhaps worth noting, as many have noted, that in terms of that carceral logic and the logic of torture and the macropolitics of death, as you put it, that the Assad regime collaborated with the US on essentially rendition

of people for torture during the so-called War on Terror, kind of somewhat undermining the idea that Assad is an anti-imperialist.

Yasser Munif: I think that's an excellent point because, as you noted, not only the Assad regime but also Mubarak and others, oftentimes the European countries and the West in general would outsource that torture because it's more difficult to execute that level of violence and torture in Western countries. And so, yes, Syria played that role, and coordinated with the US very closely in the war against terrorism, or quote unquote "terrorism", but in the end implemented its own agenda.

The other thing I think that we should mention in relation to the prison, there are two ways to understand the prison in Syria. Some people have proposed a minimalist kind of definition, which understands the prison as simply the building and the centre where people are incarcerated. Others have proposed a more maximalist definition of prison, which basically includes the entire Syrian territory, because in some ways, all people are victim in some way or another of that system. I think it's more adequate to find something in the middle where prison is not simply the building and those incarceration centres, but rather it has also annexes. So it's also sometimes some hospitals, especially during the war, during the revolution, the hospital played a major role.

For example, Hospital 601 in Damascus was more feared than the famous, or infamous SedNaya prison, because people would go there and there would be doctors helping the guard on techniques of torture, and pushing the limits like almost to death, and bringing the prisoners back so that they get more torture. So that coordination between some death doctors and some prison guards is really horrifying. I think we should understand better the collaboration between the prison system and healthcare that has also parallels in the Nazi system, where doctors oftentimes were in some ways helping prison guards and so on.

Ani White: Yeah, I definitely think the carceral logic extending beyond just the prison is a real thing. What is the state of exception and how does it apply to Syrian political history?

Yasser Munif: So that's another important dimension of Syrian politics, the state of exception or the state of emergency. It was called the state of emergency in Syria. It's the idea that the state can suspend the legal system to preserve itself, and preserve its interest. It represents a kind of desire on behalf of the state to, on the one hand, be legalistic and be part of the international community, but also using that powerful weapon

that actually many “modern” states between quotation marks, which is the state of exception, that the law can be suspended because the state has an interest in doing that. So the way it was justified in Syria - the state of emergency was imposed in 1963 when the third party took power, and it can also be traced back to periods preceding that in the 1950s, when Abdel Nasser became de facto President through the union between Syria and Egypt. It was also imposed during the French colonization of Syria during the French mandate. So one could also trace back that state of exception or state of emergency.

But it's been in place in Syria since at least 1963 with the rise to power of the Ba'ath party, and has become a tool that the Syrian regime always utilised against political parties, against any political dissidents and any form of political protest, to say that Syria is at war against Israel and the West in general, the Imperialist West, and therefore, it can use that state of emergency because of that, and can justify the way that it's running the state. And it became a major demand on behalf of the protesters when the revolution started in 2011, one of the main demands was people wanted the end of the state of emergency. It was finally lifted in 2012, but was quickly replaced by counterterrorism laws which basically played the same role as the state of emergency or the state of exception, but are more acceptable for the international community because many countries actually, whether in the West or elsewhere, have similar rules compared to laws where law is suspended because the state needs to do certain things that would not be acceptable or permissible in “normal days”.

So Syrians have no political rights. They cannot participate freely in political parties. There are no free elections. And in addition to that, they are completely powerless when it comes to the legal system because of that law. So, again, this is not to say that the state of exception is unique to Syria, but I would argue that in Syria, the state of emergency or the state of exception was implemented on a larger scale, and is much more visible and had lethal consequences, obviously.

Ani White: You describe a process of Assadist urbicide or the killing of cities. Can you explain that?

Yasser Munif: Yeah, so I use this concept of urbicide developed by a number of intellectuals - the idea of killing cities or the urban texture during conflict. One could also think about this concept outside conflict and outside war. But I use it in the context of Aleppo during the revolution, to understand the spacial aspect of the revolution. So urbicide was basically used by the regime to take control of certain areas in Aleppo.

Obviously, it can be utilised in other cities but the focus in my book is on Aleppo, and I identified several strategies that the Syrian regime used. They include, for example, horizontal power and flows. We're thinking about the spatial aspect of the revolution. And so the ways that the regime, for example, segmented the city of Aleppo in small areas that it can control better by putting checkpoints, and by making sure that there is no communication or coordination between neighbourhoods that are perceived as threatening. At the same time, again, if we look at this horizontal operation or flows, there were pro regime militias that were moving quickly from one neighbourhood to another. They're called the Shabiḥa and they're infamous. Everyone has seen them during the revolution, but they were also present before the revolution, again to make sure that they remind the Syrians that they are watched, that the state is present. So whenever there was any rebellion or any kind of protest in the early days of the revolution, they know the city very well. They know the families very well. They know the streets of the city of Aleppo, oftentimes narrow streets where tanks cannot enter and so on. So they would be sent there and they would crush any form of protest.

So it's important to think about the city on that horizontal level, but also on what I call the vertical power. It's not obviously a concept that I developed, it was developed by others. But trying to understand how the Syrian regime positioned its snipers in the city by using high-rises, including luxury hotels or administrative buildings or minarets. When you look at those different buildings where the snipers were positioned, what you find is the different forms of powers or the different groups that were allied to the Syrian regime. So the luxury hotels represented the neoliberal or traditional economic power. So those hotels were given to the regime, and the regime occupied the roofs where it positioned snipers. Then the second power is obviously the massive bureaucracy of the state and so those buildings represented that bureaucracy. There are very important buildings in Aleppo where dozens of snipers were positioned, and they were able to really kill many people in different areas, because those tall buildings had views over a number of different neighbourhoods.

Thirdly, the religious power symbolised by the minarets and the mosques where also some snipers were positioned. In addition to that, the snipers obviously, there are the helicopters dropping the barrel bombs and what have you. You could understand the geography of death by looking at the areas that were targeted by the Syrian regime, where those barrel bombs were dropped, there were almost 100,000 explosive barrels were dropped in Syria.

By mapping those, one could begin to understand the state logic, and why is it that they were focusing on certain areas and not others, and dig further and understand the military logic through that spatial mapping.

I think that the Syrian regime has a really very deep understanding of space, and it was able to instrumentalise it and use it during the revolution, by positioning its military. It's an old logic. It didn't start with the Syrian revolution, because the Syrian regime always felt that there is a threat of rebellion. and faced actually a rebellion in the 1980s - an urban rebellion - and therefore, one can trace back that urban logic, at least to that period of the 1980s. So if you look at Aleppo, many of the military compounds and military centres, intelligence, security centres, they're surrounding the city in a very strategic way. Additionally, there is also the topography of the city, again, a spatial dimension that can also help us understand the military logic of the Syrian regime. So, for example, the river was utilised in a certain way by the regime. The hilltops were utilised, to position its military to control the lower areas in the city. The green areas and the parks were utilised, and so on, to execute people and then drop them in the river. The river would bring those dead people to the areas controlled by the revolutionaries and so on.

So I mean, that's what I meant by urbicide, trying to understand the lethal power of the state and the regime through space, which is oftentimes a neglected dimension in any conflict, but especially in the Syrian conflict. And we need much more, I think, studies and analysis of different areas, not only the urban but also the countryside, because it has its own different logic to really understand an important aspect of the revolution and the counter revolution.

Ani White: You mentioned the targeting of certain areas over others and I think it's a related question: how did the regime weaponize demographics?

Yasser Munif: So that's another important question for the Syrian regime - which is gathering information about its population. As a reminder, sociology as a field, the social sciences as a field were initially created to help the state better understand its population in order to better control it. I mean, that's the history of sociology, which is different from anthropology. Anthropology was initially developed to further the colonial enterprise, and help the colonial power understand the population that are outside Europe, or the West. So in that sense, sociology and information or knowledge about the population is not specific to the Syrian regime. But the Syrian regime obviously had gathered a lot of information about the population, whether

that's the different religious sects, the sectarian dimension of the population, where the wealthy and the poor people live, a lot of information about the informal settlements and so on and so forth.

So I tried to look at, again, Aleppo, I used Aleppo as an example to see the ways that the Syrian regime took all these parameters of the population, whether they are young or old, whether they are living in the countryside or in the city, whether they are rich or poor, whether they are Arab or Kurds, Christian or Muslim, and so on and so forth, Palestinian or non Palestinian, and utilise all these different properties or different characteristics of the population to weaponize them and making sure that, for example, that there is tension between Christians and Muslims, if it's local, making sure that it becomes national, if it doesn't exist, try to provoke it and so on. For example, the Syrian regime oftentimes would send undercover militias dressed in Islamic uniform to Christian areas and massacre the population, so that people think those people were massacred by Islamists and vice versa. And same thing with the Palestinians. I mean, there were Palestinian militias, but there was also a rebellion in the Palestinian camp, so the Syrian regime took - and you could look that up, it's been documented and it's not even controversial, I mean, there were pictures taken and footage and so on - it took a bus of Palestinian fighters who are pro regime and killed them, and then made the Palestinian camp believe that they were killed by the opposition. So it really instrumentalised the population in different ways, to make sure that it's fragmented in ways that will serve the interest of the state, the interest of the regime, as opposed to the interest of the rebellion.

So instead of people really working together along class lines or in their own interests, they were segmented in all these different ways at different phases of the revolution, to prevent the consolidation of a big oppositional revolutionary bloc. Some of it predates the revolution. It didn't start with the revolution, it was intensified by the revolution. One example for that is the Kurdish population was displaced because, again, the Syrian regime had this hatred for the Kurds because it's Arab nationalist in a very chauvinistic way. So the Kurds were displaced from the North, and the Syrian regime built an Arab belt around the border between Syria and Turkey to prevent the potential formation of a Kurdish state between Turkey and Syria. And obviously, it was coordinating with Iraq and Iran and Turkey in different ways, making sure that the Kurds don't have autonomy or self rule. So very early on, the Arab and the Kurdish populations, there were a lot of tensions between some of the tribes that are in those areas and we saw how they were, again, instrumentalised during the revolution. Those are some of the ways that the regime

weaponised the demographics. I mean, we can go much more in depth, but I think the logic is clear.

Ani White: Yes. And how did the economic policies of the Assads back to the 70s factor into the emergence of resistance? And how have the politics of bread, or agrarian policy, played out in modern Syrian history?

Yasser Munif: Obviously, the economy played a major role in the immiseration of the Syrian population, its marginalization, the high unemployment rate, and so on, and was one of the main reason for the revolt. And again, it's not unique to Syria, many Arab countries were facing the same kind of situation. So there was an important agrarian reform implemented in the 1960s, and when the Ba'ath took power - and especially Assad - because the Ba'ath took power and a number of other leaders, but he was able to put them in prison or exile them.

By 1970, he was controlling monopolizing power. So he started reversing the agrarian reform in the 1970s, and undoing some of the gains of that reform. But despite that, the agrarian reform was important, despite the limitations. As a result, the economy in Syria, industrialization was really import substitution industrialization, and was based on agricultural production for its survival.

So it was really small and ineffective and dependent on agriculture, and oftentimes that

was not predictable, and therefore oftentimes depending on the seasons the industry suffered. It's not like the kind of industry that you can plan and predict, and so on. It was depending on the season when there were droughts, obviously, that the industry suffered a lot. So, in other words, the regime was really dependent on oil revenues and aid from Gulf countries and others, and also on the remittance from the Syrian diaspora, mostly in the Gulf countries and all that was declining. In addition, the Syrian population was growing, and that was compounding and complexifying the problems of the economy.

Finally, I would say that the liberalization of the economy which begun in the 1980s but amplified in 2000, when Bashar al-Assad took power after his father, with the neoliberal turn, and that had major dire consequences on the population, which was growing at a fast pace. Many people, many young men and women with university degrees, would not find jobs. The unemployment rate among the young population was extremely high. All these factors really were instrumental in the revolt. Many people joined the revolt because of that economic situation. Not only - the political humiliation of the Syrian population is obviously very important, but one cannot really understand the Syrian revolt and the Syrian revolution without understanding that economic background that Syria was undergoing.

Ani White: And you argued that the Syrian revolutionaries developed a new form of



nationalism opposed to official state nationalism. So what distinguished this new form of nationalism and what practices were associated with it?

Yasser Munif: Yeah, I think it's important to differentiate between different forms of nationalism. Again, sometimes people have a tendency to conflate those and to talk about nationalism in general. Sometimes people think that nationalism in Europe is similar to nationalism in the Global South. So I think it's important to differentiate between all these different forms of nationalism. Obviously, European nationalism is chauvinistic. It's white supremacist, it's expansionist. It's about furthering Imperial or colonial logic. Nationalism in the Global South, not always, I mean, it can be also very chauvinistic and very racist, and there are countless examples of that in the Arab region and beyond. India is a good example of how nationalism can be deployed against minorities, or against certain populations. But it can also be emancipatory. Popular nationalism often played that role of becoming the dominant ideology, when there was colonization against, for example, the French or against the British, it was a way to bring the population together, and build a block against that Imperial or colonial power. That was the case in Syria. The early nationalism in Syria emerged in the 1920s, and it was a very popular form of nationalism. It wasn't some intellectuals writing about the way it should be done, and so on. So it was a nationalism that was taking, and shaping, in the midst of trouble.

In order to understand what happened in 2011, I think it's important to go back to that period of the early nationalism of the 1920s, where people were organizing in very similar ways, organizing and forming different councils and groups, in order to fight and to resist the French. As they were doing that, they were developing this nationalist identity. So I think the same thing started happening in Syria in 2011, as people started working together, opposing the sectarian logic, understanding that was imposed from above by the Syrian regime, that the Syrian people have so much in common, whether they are Christian or Muslim or they are Kurdish or non Kurdish Arabs, whether they are coming from different backgrounds. There is a sizeable Palestinian population, and so on. So there was a lot of that popular nationalism emerging in the beginning, and anyone shouting or screaming sectarian slogans in the early days of the revolution would be removed from the protests or marginalised, or people would really exclude them from the revolutionary process. It wasn't acceptable to be sectarian. So it was playing that role of building nationalism from below, of experimenting and discovering how to be Syrian differently or otherwise, because for many decades Syrians grew

up with that Ba'ath Party nationalism. The Ba'ath Party is obviously an Arab nationalist party and whether it's Arab nationalism or Syrian nationalism, it played a major role in the curriculum in schools. But it was very archaic, and people understood that it was deployed by the state to preserve and further the state's interests, and to preserve the interests of the Assad regime. That popular nationalism was oppositional to that. It was reacting against that state centric nationalism, oftentimes scripted. It came from a few books that the Syrian regime considered like Bibles, that almost everyone had to read, and slowly but surely Assad the father became the main theoretician of nationalism, and people had to learn the slogans and so on, as part of that state-centric official nationalism.

This is what I tried to look at, the differences and the ways that the popular nationalism was extremely important to build an identity, a glue to all these different groups to come together and to oppose authoritarian rule. So that is a nationalism that one cannot really understand by reading articles. It's not scripted in a certain way, unlike the official nationalism. One has to go to the protest and look at the practices or praxes of the people, what they are doing on the ground, and what they're going to find is a very messy process, very heterogeneous. It's a very decentralised form of nationalism. It's multiple in that sense, unlike the very centralised and singular kind of nationalism of the state or the official nationalism. So that's what I tried to do, opposing those two nationalisms to better understand popular nationalism and its creative and innovative aspects.

Ani White: Yeah. I think one good prominent example of this was the chants and slogans of "Sunnis and Alawis are One!" and "Syrians are One", which sort of undermined the sectarianism that the regime was deliberately stoking at the time.

Yasser Munif: You're exactly right. Those slogans were extremely important and people were very creative in amplifying those important ideas, that we have so much in common as Christians and Muslims and Kurds and Arabs. Sometimes the Assad regime would send undercover security to actually try to scream or impose other slogans. And as I said, in the beginning, they were marginal. But again, they would try to videotape this one person who oftentimes would be like a security agent and so on, shouting very disturbing slogans that no one has ever heard and then putting it on the internet and saying, "oh, look what they're shouting and what they're saying". That was part of the Syrian regimes strategy, which is trying to fragment the population and try to impose the sectarian logic which was very detrimental, and at some point it became actually very dominant, unfortunately.

Ani White: How did revolutionaries respond to the encroachment of ISIS at the extreme, and other sectarians as well?

Yasser Munif: So I think it's important to differentiate between two forms of political Islam. One is to a certain extent nationalist and it can be democratic or undemocratic, oftentimes undemocratic. But what's important is that it's nationalist, and was mostly interested in mobilizing the Syrian population against the Assad regime. So I think it's important to differentiate that form of political Islam from the internationalist Islam of ISIS or Al Qaeda, who are very much opposed to nationalism, to Syrianness. When I was in Manbij and ISIS started taking over the city, oftentimes they would remove from the walls any nationalist slogans. I mean nationalism in the sense of popular nationalism that I described, slogans like, for example, "the real Syrians are revolutionaries", or "to be Syrians means to serve one city and one's population, not the Assad regime", and so on. So ISIS came and they started removing all those slogans and saying those are blasphemous, and the only language we should speak is the language of Islam and so on. There was an important moment, that I think shocked many people in the world when ISIS removed the border between Syria and Iraq, to remind everyone that they are fighting for a post-national ummah, that they don't recognise those nation-states, that those nation-states were imposed by the west - which is true. Those are the by-products of Sykes-Picot and the Western European dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. But one, obviously is opposed to that kind of internationalism of ISIS and so on. I support, for example, a socialist Arab nationalism or an open Arab nationalism to a certain extent, that is inclusive and not exclusive of the Kurdish and other minorities, that sees a lot of common interest between different Arab countries, and therefore a little bit like the kind of internationalism or Latin Americanism of Che Guevara and others, who thought that it was important to unify, to oppose imperialist power and so on.

But obviously ISIS was not dismantling the borders for that reason. What they wanted to do is destroy the nationalist Arab state and impose an Islamic logic instead. Unfortunately, there was no powerful left to propose a different alternative to that, so we were left with that kind of post-nationalism brought by ISIS and Al Qaeda. But I think it's important to understand that the Syrian regime was always interested in empowering Islamists again, to fight and to undermine the unions and progressive parties and the communists who were very powerful in Syria and in Iraq, to a certain extent - much more powerful in Iraq than in Syria but they had some presence in Syria - and they were completely destroyed.

The Syrian regime oftentimes was allied directly or indirectly with Islamists, despite that moment of tension with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. But then later on, it allowed the Saudi to play a major role in funding jihadists in the 1980s and to fund a certain form of Wahhabi Islam, very sectarian, in order to undermine the left. I can give at least one example of that kind of collaboration, de facto collaboration between jihadists and Al Assad. I'm not suggesting that there was a big conspiracy. Some Syrians did believe that there was a big conspiracy, that ISIS was created by security agents and so on. I think there is some truth to that, but it's not as simple. But in 2012, the Syrian regime released thousands of jihadists, many of whom became major leaders in some of the most important jihadist groups in Syria. There is even footage of them in Sednaya up until 2012 and then they were released. Some of them were international figures that were on the wanted list of the US because of their role with Al Qaeda. So they were released in 2012, again for the Syrian regime to undermine the popular aspect of the revolt, the progressive and leftist dimension of the revolution, and the liberal dimension, and to empower the Islamists. By doing that, in a certain way, there was almost like a de facto alliance between the Syrian regime and ISIS and Al Qaeda, because the Syrian regime wanted to crush the popular revolt, and in a certain way empowered the jihadists and ISIS, and therefore almost like de facto become allied with the international community by telling them, "Look, there is no real opposition in Syria. They're not secular, they're all Islamists, they are terrorists. They are bombing your cities, whether that's Paris or what have you". And therefore there was this de facto alliance between the West and the Syrian regime.

And the same thing is true with ISIS in many areas. If you go back and look at where they were operating, and what their priorities were, they were really oftentimes behind the frontline and they were attacking the revolutionaries from behind, as the revolutionaries were on the front attacking the Syrian regime, ISIS would come to a city almost peacefully, they would enter their military forces, and sometimes they were welcomed by the population, who oftentimes didn't know what was happening until it was too late. Then they would take those cities very easily because many of the fighters were on the front and ISIS was in the back, fighting sometimes minor battles with the opposition, to undermine the opposition, and make it clear that the only way to oppose the regime is through ISIS or Al Qaeda, by undermining any other group.

This is why I think it's important to understand the relationship between ISIS and the Assad regime, without reducing it to a conspiracy. I think they

have common interest in undermining the revolt on both sides. Oftentimes there was a number of places where the opposition was fighting towards one against ISIS, another one against the Syrian regime. In those areas, oftentimes ISIS and the Syrian regime would not fight each other until much later in the process, when it became too obvious and Assad had to start fighting them, and the Russians started supporting and helping them. But for a very long time, Assad was avoiding depleting his forces in any wars against ISIS or Al Qaeda, letting them grow, knowing that the West, generally speaking, would much prefer a “secular” Assad regime than those sectarian jihadist groups.

Ani White: Yeah, I think it's very true that it benefits the Assad regime for the international community to perceive any resistance as sectarian, and that's been a very deliberate strategy. But what's next for those of us who uphold the Middle Eastern and North African revolutions?

Yasser Munif: So as I mentioned before, I think it's very important to understand the Syrian revolution as part of much bigger process, that this is not simply about Syria, or about Egypt, or about Sudan. I mean, obviously, those processes are very much interrelated. I think one of the challenges in the past ten years has been that the amount of violence in Syria was monumental and so I don't blame people when they are hyper focused on their own struggles, because every day there is more death and more destruction and more violence and people are very focused on that level. But I think there is need to understand the interconnectedness of those Arab revolts, and understand that we have so much in common between the Syrians opposing the Syrian regime and the Sudanese, the revolutionaries, and the Egyptian protesters and so on, with the Tunisians and so on, and learn from each other. I think that the Sudanese are doing that. I was in touch with Sudanese, who are contacting activists and organisers in the entire Arab world, to better understand some of the ways that people were organizing against state violence, and against the different weapons, and asking specific questions about specific weapons and what to do against them and so on. And I think we need to expand those kind of networks, building very grassroots network among activists and organisers and understand the commonalities among those different struggles, and also the differences and specificities, I don't think we should oversimplify those dimensions. But obviously there is a lot in common and build strategies to oppose, for example, the prison system in the entire Arab world, or the security system in the entire world, or the violent neoliberal policies in the entire Arab world, and so on and so forth. So I think we gain a lot by building those networks.

Now it's been ten years: the revolution started in 2010-2011. I think it's time to learn from our mistakes and learn and share knowledge between those different revolts and processes. Learn from the myriad ways that people have been struggling and building alternatives from the ground up, whether that's in their own neighbourhood, how to defend them, how to provide bread and how to build strategies and communicate with each other and so on, despite the violence of the Arab regime.

Finally, I would say that I think some of us were a bit idealistic in the beginning. Obviously, we knew that those regime were extremely violent, but I don't think we understood the level of violence that they were willing to deploy and utilise against their own population. So now that question has to be central, knowing what the Syrian regime and other Arab authoritarian rulers are capable of and think about the ways that we can counter that. It's not simply violence against violence. I think it's a much more complex question, or equation. And so we need to develop new, innovative strategies to address that question, that central question of violence. And finally, I would say that we have to think about the long term because some of those processes are changing; those tectonic plates beneath are moving and colliding and so on and producing different processes on the surface. But those are slow, and oftentimes they take time to become visible and appear on the surface, because they are oftentimes beneath the surface.

I'm talking about social structures and social classes that are changing and developing, and people are understanding different interests, maybe in different ways. That requires a different understanding of the left, a less sectarian kind of left that is very important to rebuild, a left that is able to understand and learn from past mistakes, but also connect with other struggles in the surrounding countries in the region, but also beyond, because many of those crises are systemic. They are global. Whether they are environmental, or economic, or even crises of democracy or the nation state. We are facing all these different crises, and the crisis of fascism that takes a different form in our region. But I believe that those struggles are very much interconnected, and the challenge for us is to understand the specificity and the anatomy of those demons, and develop strategies to counter them, and develop strategies of communication and networking among all these different groups, to be ready for the second round and the third round, because I think it's going to be a very long process.

Ani White: Yeah. Thanks for that and thanks for coming on the show. Where can listeners find your work?

Yasser Munif: Thank you. Unfortunately, I don't have a website, but I often-times write articles and organise through the Global Campaign for Solidarity with the Syrian Revolution. We organise different events, including a year ago we organised a Summer University about the Syrian revolution. So trying to understand the Syrian revolution from below and we had many, many different panels in addition to global protests. Because I think that now there is a large number of Syrians in the diaspora and their allies. I believe that those should be understood as outposts of the Syrian revolution and the Arab revolts, and we should develop better alliances with groups that are in the West, where those people are, and to better communicate and learn from each other.

Ani White: Yeah, I think that's a very important point. The Syrian community is global. But again, thanks for coming on the show, and thanks for listening all. If you like what we do, please contribute to our Patreon at Patreon.com/jetpack1917. Solidarity comrades. Goodnight, and good luck.

Yasser Munif: Thank you and thank you for all the work you do. Thank you very much.

Ani White: Cheers.

About Fightback (Aotearoa/Australasia)



Fightback is a trans-Tasman socialist media project with a magazine, a website, and other platforms. We believe that a structural analysis is vital in the task of winning a world of equality and plenty for all. Capitalism, our current socio-economic system, is not only exploiting people and planet – but is designed to operate this way. Therefore, we advocate a total break with the current system to be replaced by one designed and run collectively based on principles of freedom, mutual aid, and social need.

Fightback is a trans-Tasman organization, operating in Aotearoa and Australia. In the modern era of free movement across the Tasman, 'Australasia' is becoming a reality in a way it has not been since the 19th century. So many New Zealanders (tauwi as well as tangata whenua) now live and work in Australia – and decisions made in one country increasingly impact the other, as the inter-governmental controversy surrounding the Manus Island detention camp shows.

We wish to engage socialists from both sides of the Tasman – in particular, socialists from Aotearoa living and working in Australia – to continue the lines of analysis and directions of organization which we have been pursuing. Beyond the dogmas of 'sect Marxism'; beyond national boundaries; towards a genuinely decolonised, democratic, feminist and queer-friendly anti-capitalism.

We recognise that capitalism was imposed in Aotearoa and Australia through colonisation. While we draw substantially on European whakapapa and intellectual traditions, we seek to break the unity of the European colonial project, in favour of collective self-determination and partnership between tangata whenua and tauwi. We recognise that this must be a learning process.

While we draw inspiration and lessons from history, theoretical agreement on past revolutions is not the basis for our unity. Rather, we unify around a common programme for transformation here and now.

Fightback's Points of Unity



Economic & Social Justice. White supremacist, capitalist patriarchy exploits the working majority. We support all movements for redistribution, recognition and representation (as put by socialist feminist Nancy Fraser), from the workplace to the wider community. The average union member in both Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia is a woman, so the struggle for economic democracy must be intersectional: sacrificing no liberation struggle for the sake of another.

Transnational Solidarity. Struggles in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia are interconnected with transnational struggles: to give just one example, refugee rights here are connected with the wars that force people to seek asylum. We stand against racist nationalism and imperialism, and for self-determination everywhere. This transnational solidarity crosses all geopolitical 'camps': neither Washington nor Beijing truly supports self-determination.

Radical Democracy. Socialism suffocates without democracy, as the catastrophic failures of the 20th century demonstrate. Radical democracy cannot be purely majoritarian (as this may curtail the rights of minorities), and cannot be guaranteed by states: to quote slavery abolitionist Frederick Douglass, power concedes nothing without a demand. Radical democracy is defined by the ongoing fight for self-determination in all sectors of life. We also stand for democracy within the movements, including the need for principled debate.

Popular Science. In an era marked by populist fake news from left to right, we seek to 'intellectually vaccinate' the movements against conspiracy theories and pseudo-science. As German socialists Ferdinand Lassalle and Rosa Luxemburg asserted, we must bring workers and science together, rather than locking knowledge away in paywalled journals. Although scientific research doesn't exist outside social context, and isn't the only form of knowledge, it's a necessary check on our assumptions.

Ecosocialism. Extractive capital is driving mass extinction. We support investment in sustainable infrastructure: high quality public housing, public transport, and green cities. Landlords, extractive industries, agribusiness and other beneficiaries of the status quo are preventing such sustainable solutions, so power must be taken out of their hands and given to communities.

Anti-fascism. Fascism and similar movements claim to be anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist, but instead redirect working people's anger against scapegoat groups or fictitious conspiracies. We fight all tendencies on the Left and Right which scapegoat and demonise the victims of capitalism and imperialism – including anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, transphobia, and the smearing of people fighting oppression as "terrorists". Only solidarity of all oppressed and exploited communities can solve the social problems we face.

Constitutional Transformation. Capitalism was established in Australasia through colonisation, and sovereignty was never ceded. As a tau iwi (non-indigenous) based group in Aotearoa/New Zealand and so-called Australia, we support the fight for indigenous-led constitutional transformation. Although we don't yet know exactly what constitutional transformation will look like, it must involve both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, actively engaged in building institutions based on mutual recognition.

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